COUNTRY LIFE

EVERY WEEK

APRIL 30, 2025

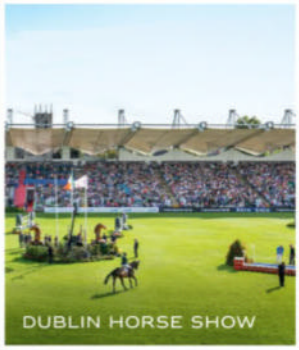
1975–2025

The renaissance of the country house

The owners and craftsmen bringing houses back to life

Coming up roses: the plants that Chelsea launched

Maypole merriment, calling cuckoos and pollen detectives



BEYOND THE STARS

Within the realm of excellence, degrees do vary. Among the world's most prestigious competitions, some shine even brighter. They offer the ideal setting for the finest horses and riders to perform, while honoring age-old traditions and protocols of elegance. These six exceptional events are now distinguished by a crown. Welcome to the Rolex Series.

OYSTER PERPETUAL DATEJUST 41

ROLEX SERIES

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BRUSSELS STEPHEX MASTERS

ROLEX

Knight Frank

REF: HSM012068283

MIDHURST, WEST SUSSEX

A period country house immaculately refurbished to exacting standards and occupying an elevated position in the heart of the South Downs.

5 bedrooms | 6 bathrooms | 6 reception rooms | Cinema | Guest barn annexe | Formal gardens | Sun terraces | Mediterranean courtyard garden
Kitchen gardens | Woodland | Tennis court | Swimming pool | Garaging | EPC D | Approximately 5 acres | Freehold | Council Tax band H
Planning permission in perpetuity for an indoor swimming pool complex | Haslemere 11 miles (London Waterloo from 50 minutes)

Guide price £7,250,000

Knight Frank London
020 7861 1093
oliver.rodbourne@knightfrank.com

Knight Frank London
020 7861 5390
julia.meadowcroft@knightfrank.com

Knight Frank Haslemere
01428 770562
russell.grieve@knightfrank.com

MICHAEL GRAHAM

Hitchin, Hertfordshire

Guide Price: £2,000,000

5 Bedrooms | **3** Reception Rooms | **3** Bathrooms | **N/A** EPC

A Grade II listed former farmhouse with outbuildings and equestrian facilities, set in around 11.81 acres of gardens and paddocks. Originally an open hall house dating from the 16th century, the property has been extended and now offers 2,536 sq. ft. of living space, plus a three-bedroom annexe. Grounds include a swimming pool, stables, a manege, and a duck pond.

Michael Graham Hitchin
Philip Powell **01462 441700**

Michael Graham London
Richard Banks **020 8092 1888**

Knight Frank

REF: HNG012217376

NEAR ALTON, HAMPSHIRE

Supremely elegant Georgian and Arts and Crafts style country house in an idyllic rural setting.

4-5 bedrooms | 6 bathrooms | 5 reception rooms | 2 ancillary lodges | Outdoor swimming pool with pool house | Outbuildings
Party barn with ancillary accommodation | Carport | Approximately 19 acres | EPC B | Freehold | Council Tax band H
Upton Grey 3 miles | Alton 3.6 miles (London Waterloo from 67 minutes)

Guide price £8,500,000

Knight Frank London
020 7861 1080
edward.cunningham@knightframk.com

Knight Frank North Hampshire
01256 630976
clive.moon@knightfrank.com

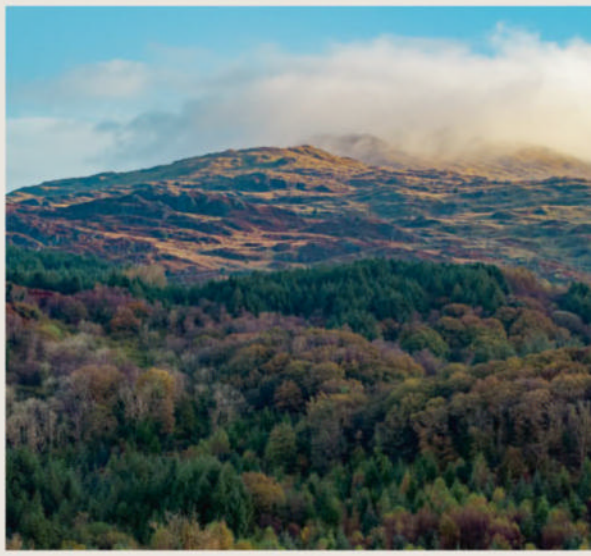
SPECTACULAR UPLAND ESTATE

3,784

Dolgellau, North Wales. Guide £15 million

Nannau, an estate steeped in Welsh and British history, represents a unique opportunity to acquire one of the most significant rural holdings in the Eryri National Park. 3 holiday cottages, further 8 residential properties offering diversified revenue streams, 2,837 acres of in-hand farming and woodland, 3 let farms, scope for delivering environmental benefits, and numerous development opportunities.

Freehold | Council Tax Band = B-F | EPC = C-G



Rhydian Scurlock-Jones
01952 239 529
rsjones@savills.com

Alex Lawson
020 7409 8882
alawson@savills.com

savills

Surrey, Linchmere Ridge

Guide Price £3,500,000

&

A handsome family house with annexe, set in approximately 15 acres on a sought-after private lane within the South Downs National Park

Haslemere: 2.3 miles (Waterloo from 49 mins), Liphook: 4.7 miles, Guildford: 16 miles

Hall | Drawing room | Conservatory | Family room | Study | Kitchen/breakfast room | Utility room | Principal bedroom with dressing room and bathroom | 5 Further bedrooms (2 ensuite) | Family bathroom | Annexe with games room and office Garage | Double carport | Swimming pool | Tennis court | Mature gardens | Large private woodland area with high ropes walk

About 15 acres

Jenette Soulsby
Haslemere Office
01428 661 077
jenette.soulsby@struttandparker.com

Oliver Custance Baker
Country Department
020 7591 2213
oliver.custance.baker@struttandparker.com

STRUTT&PARKER
BNP PARIBAS GROUP

Nottinghamshire, Stragglethorpe

Guide Price £1,320,000 (Lot 1)

&

A charming farmhouse with additional red brick buildings providing redevelopment opportunities, nestled in Nottinghamshire's picturesque countryside

Cotgrave: 1 mile, Radcliffe-on-Trent: 3 miles, Nottingham: 7 miles (London St Pancras 1 hr 35 mins),
Melton Mowbray: 14 miles, Grantham: 18 miles (London King's Cross 1 hr 2 mins)
Spacious 8-bedroom farmhouse with original features | 5.35 acre paddock | Orchard | Range of traditional redbrick buildings | Good road links

Lot 1: About 7.11 acres (2.88ha)

Additional 149.86 acres land with modern farm buildings available separately (Guide Price for the Whole £3,200,000)

Grace Millbank
Eastern Estates & Farm Agency
07384 828 776
grace.millbank@struttandparker.com

Sam Holt
Eastern Estates & Farm Agency
07702 317 301
sam.holt@struttandparker.com

Knight Frank

OSEA ISLAND, ESSEX

A stunning and historic private island estate extending to about 380 acres, only 40 miles from central London.

38 residential properties | 47,301 sq ft residential accommodation
Multiple event premises & pub (61,366 sq ft) | Further development potential | Ancient roman causeway
Direct access to London by air (light aircraft landing strip) | Pier & boating access | Freehold

Guide price £25,000,000

Knight Frank London
020 3995 0779
georgie.veale@knightfrank.com

Fine & Country
01277 714044
simon.pelling@fineandcountry.com

knightfrank.co.uk

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DORNEY, WINDSOR

An outstanding Grade II Listed period country house with Elizabethan elements set in Royal Windsor.

6 bedrooms | 4 bathrooms | 5 reception rooms | 2 bedroom lodge house | 2 bedroom bungalow
Sun terrace | Stabling with planning consent for reconfiguration | EPC D | Freehold
Council Tax band H | Taplow 3.3 miles | Windsor 6 miles

Guide price £4,500,000

Knight Frank Ascot & Virginia Water
01344 293153
alex.hancock@knightfrank.com

Knight Frank London
020 7861 1166
george.pratt@knightfrank.com

REF: CHO012541203

Knight Frank

REF: CHO012592367

HEYDON, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

A stunning traditional Grade II Listed house, with a modern extension, in an elevated position with far-reaching views towards Cambridge.

7 bedrooms | 4 bathrooms | 7 reception rooms | Extensive lawned & formal gardens | Terrace | Lake | Fishponds | Woodland | Paddocks with field shelters Garaging | Outbuildings | Approximately 15.13 acres | EPC D | Freehold | Council Tax band H | Royston station 6.4 miles (London St Pancras from 39 minutes)

Guide price £4,500,000

Knight Frank London
020 7861 1114
edward.welton@knightframk.com

Knight Frank London
020 3640 7032
rose.lawson@knightframk.com

Knight Frank Cambridge
01223 972911
michael.houlden@knightframk.com

Knight Frank

REF: CHO012458954

GILLAN CREEK, CORNWALL

A meticulously restored and imposing example of an Art Moderne style waterfront home positioned in a spectacular coastal location with established gardens and far-reaching views across Falmouth Bay.

4-6 bedrooms | 4 bathrooms | 4 reception rooms | Wine cellar | Indoor swimming pool | Gym | Double Garage | Workshop | Entertaining terraces
Sub-tropical terraced gardens | Woodland | Approximately 9.56 acres | EPC F | Freehold | Council Tax band H
Truro 23 miles (London Paddington 4 hours 17 minutes)

Guide price £5,000,000

Knight Frank London
020 7861 1717
hamish.humfrey@knightfrank.com

Knight Frank Exeter
01392 848839
louise.glanville@knightfrank.com

Knight Frank

REF: HOT012313276

PANGBOURNE, WEST BERKSHIRE

An outstanding Arts and Crafts Grade II* listed country house, designed and built in 1897.

9 bedrooms | 5 bathrooms | 7 reception rooms | Garaging with store rooms | Landscaped lawned gardens | Paved terrace | Tennis court | Woodland
Vegetable & fruit gardens | Orchards | Approximately 5.17 acres | EPC F | Freehold | Council Tax band H
Pangbourne station 1.6 miles (London Paddington from 41 minutes)

Offers in the region of £4,250,000

Knight Frank London
020 7861 1114
edward.welton@knightframk.com

Knight Frank Henley-on-Thames
01491 844901
nick.warner@knightfrank.com

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REF: EDN01237 2019

DALMELLINGTON, EAST AYRSHIRE

A magical and historic estate on the Kirkcudbrightshire border, peacefully situated in the hills above the valley of the River Doon.

7 bedrooms | 5 bathrooms | 3 reception rooms | Self-contained wing | Biomass heating system | Fine lawns | Glasshouse, rock & water garden
Gatehouse & 6 further houses | Glamping pods | Stables | Miles of hacking | Superb wildlife habitats | Lochs, river gorge and waterfall | Organic sheep farm
2.5 miles of fishing on the River Doon | 700 acres of native woodland | Approximately 2,850 acres | A-listed | Freehold | Dalmellington 2 miles | Ayr 15 miles

Offers over £5,000,000

Knight Frank Scotland
0131 222 9608
tom.stewart-moore@knightframk.com

Knight Frank London
020 7861 1779
christopher.dewe@knightfrank.com

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REF: BRS012452788

PENALLT, MONMOUTHSHIRE

The Argoed is unquestionably one of the most prominent private residences in the Wye Valley with an extraordinarily rich history to match.

7 bedrooms | 4 bathrooms | 5 reception rooms | Stabling | Loggia | Outbuildings | Cellar | Approximately 10.9 acres | EPC F | Freehold | Council Tax band I
Monmouth 5.2 miles | Bristol 30 miles

Guide price £2,600,000

Knight Frank Bristol
01173 171996
robin.engley@knightfrank.com

Knight Frank

REF: EBR012494247

MAYBOLE, SOUTH AYRSHIRE

An exceptional B-listed Georgian property set within approximately 29 acres of landscaped gardens, parkland and mature woodland.

5 bedrooms | 3 bathrooms | 4 reception rooms | 3-bedroom cottage with adjoining studio flat | Outbuildings | Stabling | Gymnasium with sauna, studio & bar
Tennis court | Paddocks | Parkland | Mature woodland | EPC E | Freehold | Council Tax band H
Ayr 5 miles | Glasgow 43 miles

Offers in excess of £1,650,000

Knight Frank Scotland
0131 222 9600
edward.douglas-home@knightfrank.com

Knight Frank

REF: BRS150024

UPPER MILTON, SOMERSET

An impressive 17th Century Grade II* listed country house with exceptional views across the open countryside.

6 - 8 bedrooms | 4 bathrooms | 4 reception rooms | Attractive gardens | Courtyard | Copse | Paddock | Parking | Outbuildings | Approximately 7.29 acres
Freehold | Council Tax band G | Wells 1 mile | Bristol 20 miles

Guide price £2,500,000

Knight Frank London
020 7590 2451
sarah.ka.brown@knightfrank.com

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Hampshire, Upton

Guide Price £2,500,000

&

A beautiful Grade II listed village house in a wonderful rural setting in the Bourne Valley with extensive gardens and large tithe barn

Hurstbourne Tarrant: 2 miles, Andover: 7 miles (Waterloo 69 mins), Whitchurch: 8 miles (Waterloo 59 mins), Newbury: 13 miles

Hall | Drawing room | Dining room | Kitchen/breakfast room | Orangery | Principal bedroom with ensuite bathroom

3 Further bedrooms (one ensuite) | Family bathroom | Tithe barn | Outbuildings

Stables | Gardens and grounds

About 1.93 acres

Alex Barton

Newbury Office

01635 521 707

alex.barton@struttandparker.com

Oliver Custance Baker

Country Department

020 7591 2213

oliver.custance.baker@struttandparker.com

STRUTT&PARKER
BNP PARIBAS GROUP

West Sussex, Emsworth

Guide Price £2,650,000

&

A remarkable Grade II listed house with fabulous gardens, swimming pool, original outbuildings and fives court, all with endless potential

Emsworth: 2.9 miles, Chichester: 7.4 miles, London Gatwick Airport: 51 miles, Central London: 70 miles

Reception hall | Kitchen/breakfast room | Dining room | Drawing room | Library | Garden room | Boot room | Utility room | 2 Sitting rooms
Pantry | Wet room with bath and shower | Principal bedroom | 9 Further bedrooms | 4 Bathrooms | 4 Cloakrooms | Wine cellar | Stores
Coach house with stables | Greenhouse | Summer house | Potting shed | Indoor swimming pool | Fives court | EPC Rating F

About 13 acres

Alice Luxmoore-Styles
Country Department
020 7052 9666
alice.luxmoore-styles@struttandparker.com

Paul Machell
Chichester Office
01243 885 665
paul.machell@struttandparker.com

Guide Price £2.1m Freehold I 7 bedrooms I 6,941 sq ft I 50.05 acres

THE OLD VICARAGE
Penrhos, Monmouthshire

A Fine Victorian former vicarage, 1867, overlooking 50 acres of its own private Monmouthshire bliss.

Known locally as the 'Orange Beacon' as its terracotta colour can be seen from afar, The Old Vicarage is perfectly placed for stunning verdant views across the Welsh landscape. The house is a splendid family home with fantastically well-proportioned rooms and acres of private gardens and grounds, ideal for children with an enthusiasm for exploring the outdoors.

Blue Book.

Sebastian Hipwood
07535 150 888
seb@bluebookagency.com

Blue Book.

Guide Price £2.85m Freehold I 8 Bedrooms I 6,681 sq ft I 2.47 acres

HOPE HOUSE
East Coker, Yeovil

A distinguished family home in a highly sought after village, Hope House showcases the timeless charm of exemplary English interiors.

Nestled behind a wall and a verdant hornbeam hedge, the house itself is Grade II listed and comes with the benefit of an annexe, swimming pool and 2.47 acres of glorious gardens.

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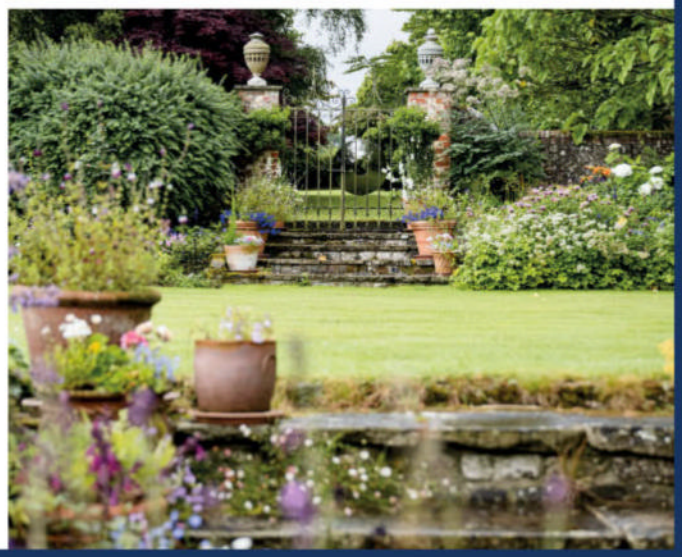
Blue Book.

Lindsay Cuthill
07967 555 545
lindsay@bluebookagency.com



Guide Price £3.95m Freehold I 10 bedrooms I 11,302 Sq ft I 6.50 acres

WYKE GREEN FARM
Froxfield, Hampshire

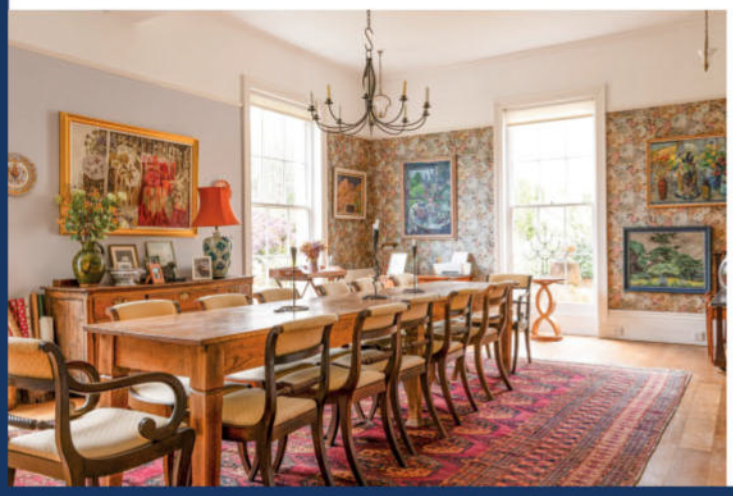
Set in the bucolic countryside of the South Downs National Park, Wyke Green Farm is a substantial Georgian former farmhouse that has been thoughtfully modernised into a splendid family home.

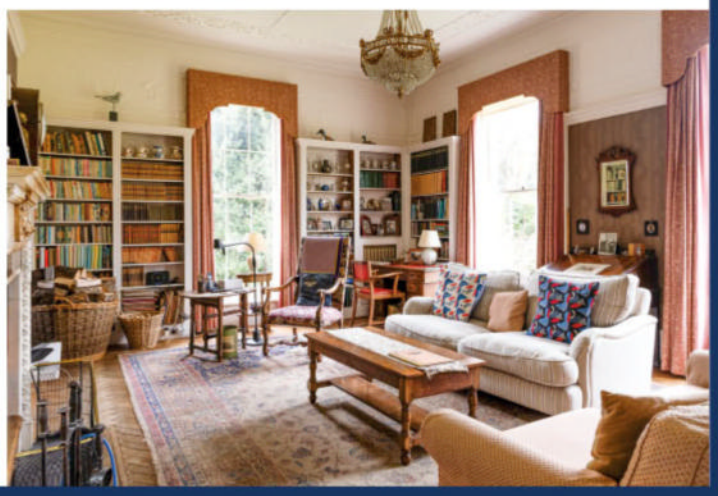
Grade II listed, its agricultural past is charmingly visible throughout the exterior space. Inside, the period interiors are generously proportioned and flow exceptionally well for family life and entertaining.

Blue Book.

Theo James-Wright
07780 475 991
theo@bluebookagency.com

Blue Book.





Guide Price £2.95m Freehold | 7 Bedrooms, | 10,770 sq ft | 8.9 acres

BURLETTS
Steyning, West Sussex

Beautiful Burletts – an elegant grade II listed Regency former rectory sitting in the centre of approximately 8.9 acres of private gardens and grounds, within a short walk of The South Downs Way.

Burletts has only changed hands twice in the last 79 years, testament to its strength as a superb family home. With excellent proportions and handsome rooms throughout, the main reception rooms have beautiful decorative plasterwork, parquet and hardwood flooring and floor to ceiling sash windows - all of which make this a particularly bright and airy house.

Blue Book.

Theo James-Wright
07780 475 991
theo@bluebookagency.com

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5 | 5 | 4 | 8

Inkpen, Berkshire. Guide £3.5 million

Beautifully modernised country home offering expansive living, panoramic views, best-in-class equestrian facilities and over 8 acres of glorious Berkshire countryside. Balcony, steam room in principal suite, swimming pool, annexe providing secondary accommodation, manège, 6 stables, and gardens.

Freehold | Council Tax Band = G | EPC = D

Claire Dwyer
01635 277 706
claire.dwyer@savills.com

Finn Mason
020 7330 8666
finn.mason@savills.com

savills

JACKSON-STOPS

WEST SUSSEX, BURY

Renovated country house in village conservation area measuring over 4,000 sq. ft of living space
£2,595,000 guide | EPC E
Chichester: 01243 786316

SOUTH MANCHESTER, HALE

Stunning family home standing on a substantial plot with elevated views across Hale Golf Course
£6,250,000 guide | EPC C
Hale: 0161 928 8881

KENT, TENTERDEN

Handsome and imposing Arts & Crafts home with a summer house and wonderful gardens
£1,500,000 guide
Kent and East Sussex: 01580 720000

WEST SUSSEX, SCAYNES HILL

Beautiful mid-18th Century house offering seven bedrooms and an outdoor swimming pool
£2,400,000 guide | EPC E
Mid-Sussex: 01444 484400

JACKSON-STOPS

SURREY, OXTED

Exceptional Grade II Listed Arts & Crafts residence set within glorious grounds
£3,850,000 guide
Oxted: 01883 712375

GLOUCESTERSHIRE, NR CHELTENHAM

Outstanding farmhouse with a Yiangou designed extension, outbuildings and 20 acres of land
£2,950,000 guide | EPC E
Cheltenham: 01242 783333

DORSET, SHAFTESBURY

Magnificent property benefitting from a cottage, pool house, tennis court, gym and outbuildings
£3,950,000 guide | EPC E
Shaftesbury: 01747 850858

SUFFOLK, KELSALE

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£2,850,000 guide
Ipswich: 01473 218218

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Hampshire issue

Why we love Hampshire, from Winchester's cobbled streets to Jane Austen, fishing on the Test and The New Forest

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JEAN-MARIE TOULGOUAT
(1927–2006)

DANS LA SERRE — oil on canvas 80 x 80 cms 31½ x 31½ ins

30 April – 23 May

Jean-Marie Toulgouat is perhaps best known for his bright and lyrical paintings of the 1990s, most often of the flowers in his garden at Giverny or his summer home in Lot-et-Garonne, yet this focus underestimates the breadth of Toulgouat's contribution as an artist, as this new exhibition demonstrates.

Newly released works from Toulgouat's Studio Estate, dating back half a century, reveal the surprising role of abstraction within Toulgouat's oeuvre and the spirit of the 'family business' of Impressionism that runs through his work, as deeply as it is intertwined in the complex history of Giverny.

Featuring over 50 artworks drawn from across his varied career, the exhibition will explore the life and work of a painter of singular talent and vision; the last remaining artistic link to Claude Monet at Giverny.

Catalogue £15 (+£3 p&p)

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Levriero Piccola in Brass
£5,460

Fluted Table Lamp
£1,635

The Maxwell Lamp
£870

Monstera Cluster Lamp
£1,310

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Ivon Hitchens (1893-1979), *Evening Marshes, Essex*, 1946 Patrick Heron (1920-1999), *Four Venetian Ovals in Green*, 1962

Royal Hospital Chelsea
LONDON

Preview Day 26 June
27 June – 1 July 2025

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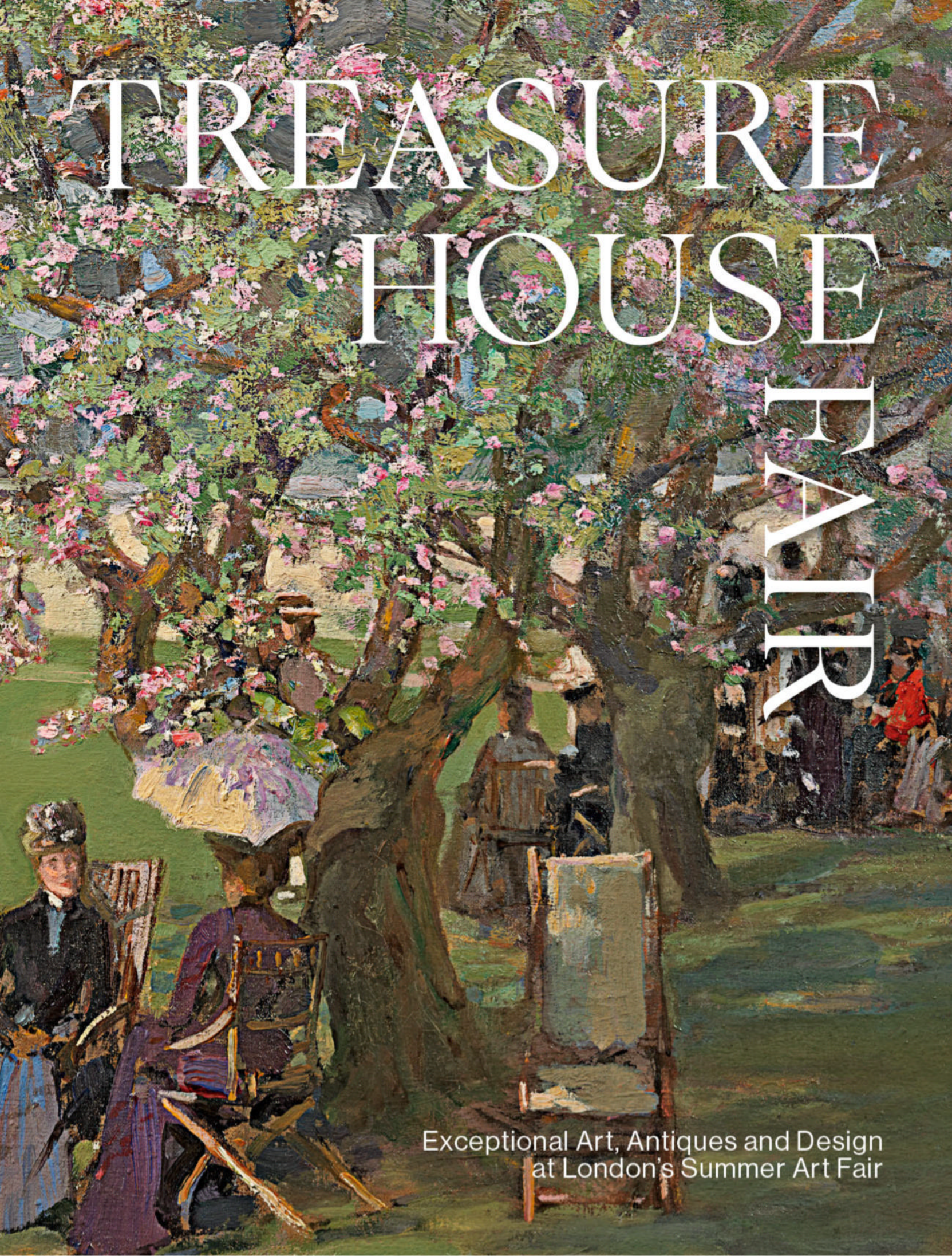
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Max White, AROI, Tower Bridge, Contre Jour, 12x16 inches, oil, £975

Hannah Cole, Café de la Mer, 24x24 inches, Acrylic, £2,100

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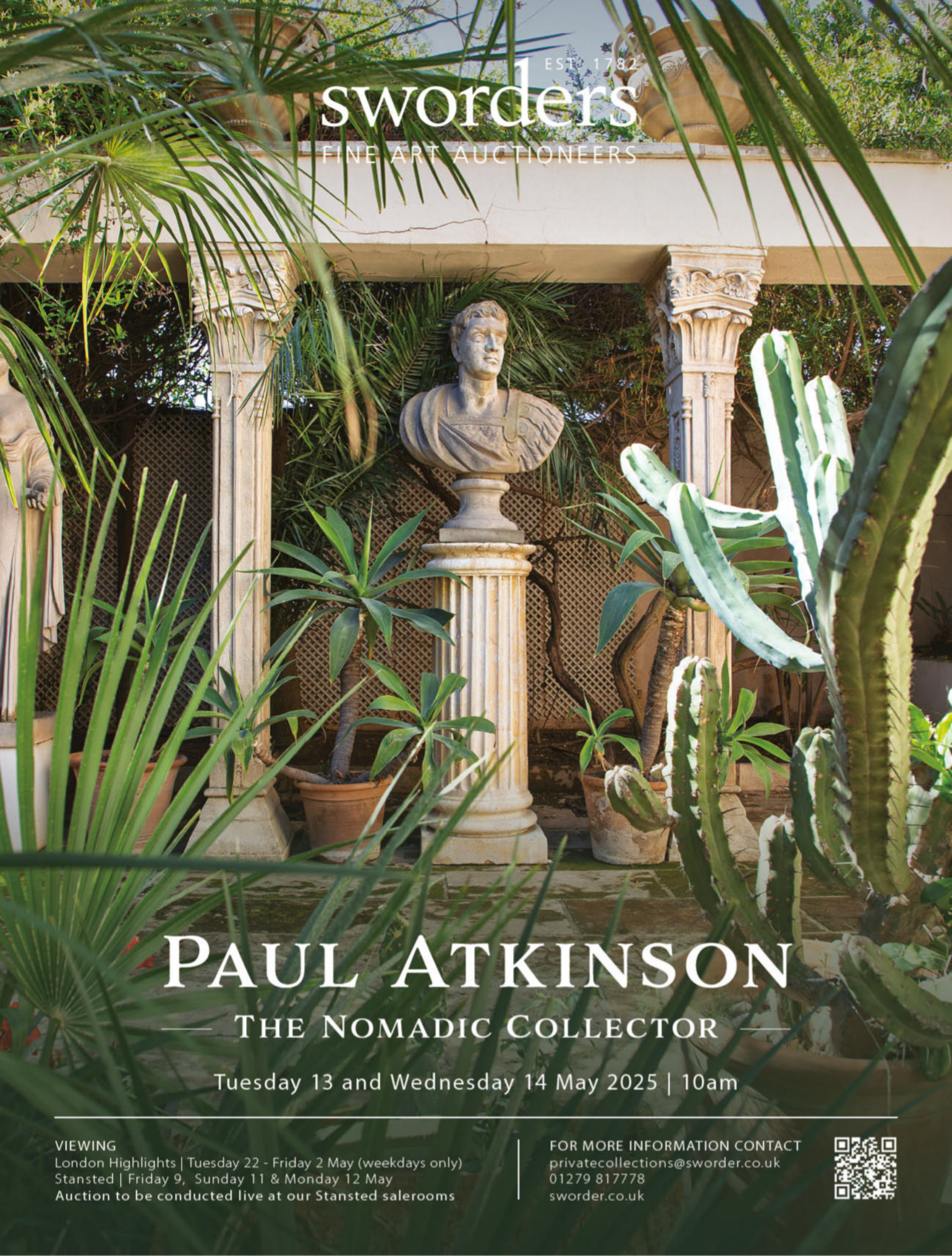

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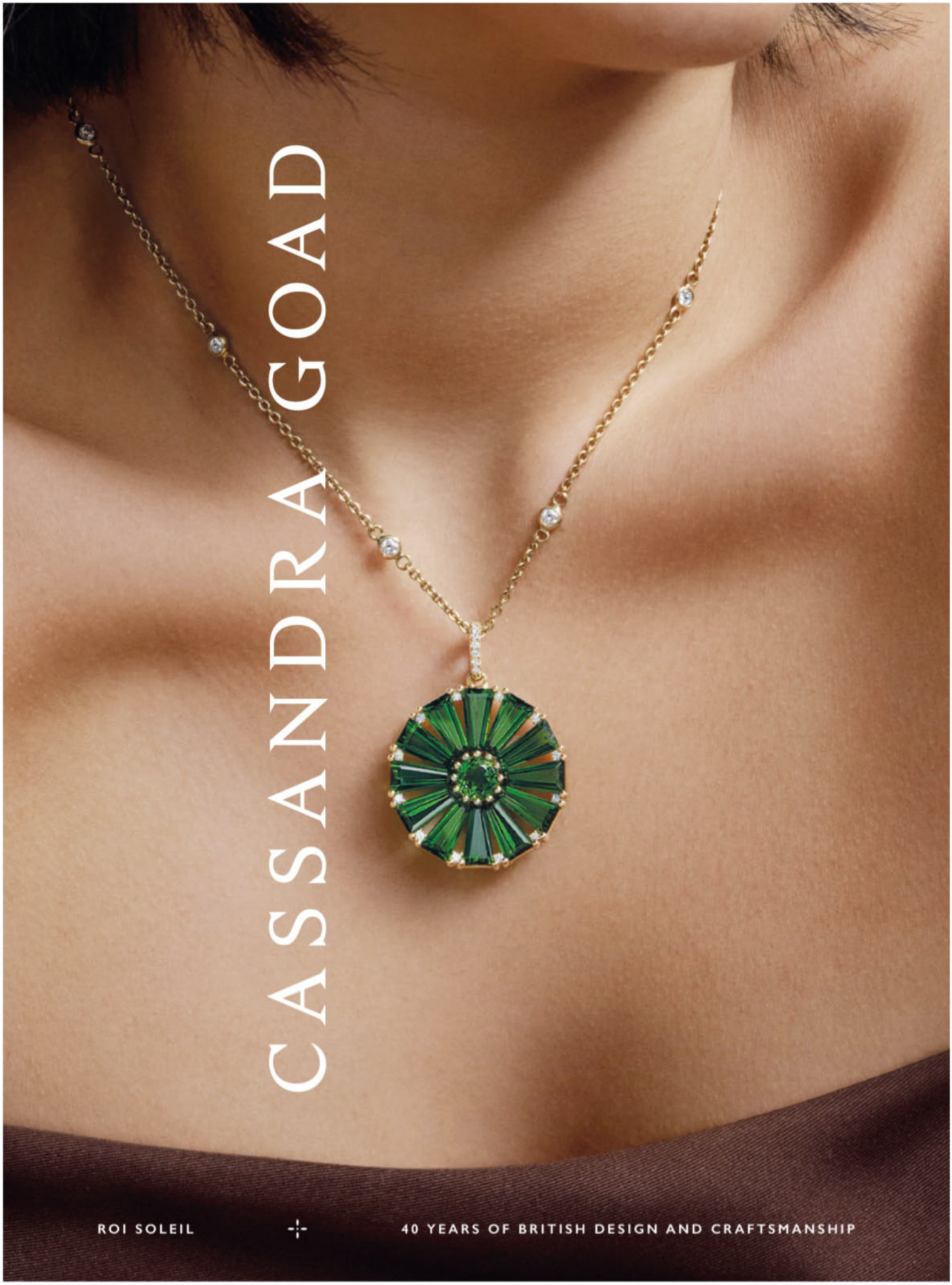
CASSANDRA GOAD
ROI SOLEIL
40 YEARS OF BRITISH DESIGN AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

COUNTRY LIFE

VOL CCXXIV NO 18, APRIL 30, 2025

The Countess of Sandwich

Julie Montagu is chatelaine of Mapperton House, Gardens and Wildlands in Beaminster, Dorset, and presenter of the *American Countess* YouTube channel. She has a degree in Country House Studies from the University of Buckingham and is married to Luke Montagu, the 12th Earl of Sandwich, with whom she manages Mapperton's operations, preservation and public opening.

Photographed at home by Millie Pilkington

Contents April 30, 2025

Russell Sach

Super bowl: a kaleidoscope of colour engulfs trainee horticulturist Evan Prince as he tends to some of the shrubs in the Azalea Bowl at Exbury Gardens in Hampshire. The 200-acre attraction in the New Forest is this year celebrating 70 years of opening to the public

A manor house in Gloucestershire with interior design by Pippa Paton and garden design by Paul Spink (Paul Craig)

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Triumph of the country house

IN 1974, the then Architectural Editor of COUNTRY LIFE, John Cornforth, published a report simply titled *Country Houses in Britain: Can they survive?* The answer he gave to his own question in 130 pages of detailed analysis was that they could not. Hard on the heels of this assessment—and in some points informed by its analysis—there opened at the V&A Museum 'The Destruction of the Country House, 1875–1975'. This exhibition was a polemic aimed at highlighting the sheer number of these buildings that had been—and were still being—lost. At that time, it seemed almost certain that the combination of the cost of maintenance, a decline in domestic service and punitive taxation would soon consign the remainder to oblivion.

Happily, however, the bleak predictions of the mid 1970s never came to pass. Instead, over the past 50 years, the country house in Britain has staged an astonishing recovery. Of course, the story of no two houses in this regard has been the same, but as COUNTRY LIFE's coverage makes clear there are estates being loved back to life literally every week. There are also new houses being built. At the same time, in all their variety, these buildings have come to occupy an outstanding place in the popular consciousness as cultural attractions, places of recreation and venues for events, from weddings to pop concerts (*page 100*). They also enjoy celebrity through their use in films and on television. That success has not come easily. It has depended on the expenditure of vast sums of money and speaks of the intense love and pride felt by those responsible for these heroic endeavours.

This week's issue is a celebration of this astonishing achievement. Among other themes, it traces the history of this revival and identifies some of the crucial episodes that have underpinned and shaped it (*page 66*). No less importantly, the human dimension of this story and the craft skills involved are examined (*page 78*). Also highlighted are five individual projects that illustrate the different approaches that have been taken to the restoration of great houses in recent years. In such a varied field, these can hardly claim to be representative, but they are illustrative of the invention, imagination and care involved.

When this issue was first planned, the story of revival into the early 21st century seemed to be uncomplicated. That is no longer true. By a strange irony, the 1970s threat of punitive taxation has reared its head again. This is a profoundly worrying development and COUNTRY LIFE can only hope that it is averted. Whatever the future holds, however, it must not be allowed to obscure what the past half century has achieved, which is nothing less than the renaissance of the country house.

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Annunciata Elwes

Success story: Dumfries House, Ayrshire, rescued after SAVE helped to raise £43 million

SAVE-ing grace

SHOULD a team of Lady Gaga look-alikes descend on the COUNTRY LIFE office, you can be sure we would pay attention. SAVE Britain's Heritage's 2014 campaign to save Smithfield (the line was 'you'd have to be Gaga to demolish') is an innovative example of the countless battles the charity has fought in the past 50 years.

The Lady Gagas can, strangely, be traced back to 1975, when, two years before he joined the staff of COUNTRY LIFE, of which he later became Editor (1984–86), architectural historian Marcus Binney founded SAVE. His inspiration was Sir Roy Strong's seminal 'The Destruction of the Country House' exhibition at the V&A Museum the previous year, which had caused public outcry over the 1,600 buildings demolished in the preceding century—and so a movement was born (*'A vibrant era for our country houses', page 66*).

The charity, which marks its 50th anniversary this year with events in Norwich, Plymouth, Glasgow and Sheffield, was, for decades, preoccupied with Battersea Power Station. Decommissioned in 1983, the riverside landmark faced various demolition threats and false dawns before its recent, extraordinary transformation into a village hub. Similarly, in 1979, SAVE's idea for an art gallery halted the demolition of Bankside Power Station, which later became Tate Modern and, in fact, the charity's drive in promoting how buildings such as these might be converted to alternative use has ever been part of its DNA, as detailed in the 1990 paper *Bright Future: The Re-use of Industrial Buildings*.

Another success story is the purchase of then dilapidated Palladian Barlaston Hall in Staffordshire for £1 in 1981; the charity issued a lawsuit against the National Coal Board and was awarded compensation for restoration. In 1989, the Buildings at Risk Register was launched, in 2007, SAVE helped raise £43 million to acquire Dumfries House in Ayrshire

> 'The challenges we face are daunting yet exciting'

and, in 2009, the spotlight turned to Liverpool's historic buildings with the exhibition 'Triumph, Disaster and Decay'. In 2011, a legal win effectively changed planning law, ensuring future major demolition plans would be environmentally assessed, and Wentworth Woodhouse, South Yorkshire, was saved for the nation in 2014.

However, not every campaign went as one would have hoped, attests COUNTRY LIFE's Architectural Editor John Goodall. 'Sadly, SAVE was unable to prevent the contents sale, in 1977, of Jacobethan Mentmore Towers in Buckinghamshire, one of its first campaigns; the house is still empty now and is gradually deteriorating. They lost that battle, but, in a way, they won the war, because what happened showed that the National Heritage Memorial Fund desperately needed money, and this helped future projects.'

Henrietta Billings, who has been director of SAVE for the past nine years, agrees that sometimes 'the big losses act as a lightning rod or a rallying cry, bringing home the value and emotion attached to these places and buildings. When we lose them, there is a real, deep feeling of loss for whole communities'.

She continues: 'We want to use our 50th birthday to equip a new generation. Evidence clearly shows historic buildings are catalysts for economic growth, community development and environmental sustainability—yet 50,000 buildings a year are demolished, many needlessly. The challenges we face are daunting yet exciting, especially where we are successful in mobilising the wider public to support and engage in our movement. Together we can ensure the restoration, revitalisation and reuse of thousands of remarkable buildings.' As such, and armed with a new website, launched earlier this year, the charity will release its Act Now! Toolkit—a guide for the general public on how to mount their own campaigns, garner press attention, respond to planning applications and so on. 'This should help people navigate what can be a complex and tiresome bureaucratic system,' she adds.

In November, SAVE returns to where it all began, the V&A, for a lecture by a well-known speaker (to be announced) on how existing buildings can be revitalised. Ms Billings refers to a Historic England report that says '670,000 new homes can be provided through existing empty properties. When you think about the Government's target of 1.5 million over the next five years, that's a pretty hefty chunk'.

As to the next 50 years, Ms Billings sees the future of high streets as a continuing focus and recognises the heritage sector is facing new challenges. 'Where we can play a really useful part is getting to the bottom of the carbon and heritage argument and making sure that our sector and our buildings are seen as part of the solution.' In terms of new housing, she talks about identifying our assets and 'making use of them rather than ignoring them', which would have environmental and social impacts.

She adds: 'Through our work on the Marks & Spencer Oxford Street campaign, we got to know a lot of developers who are keen on putting heritage buildings at the centre of new developments, because they create distinctive character, which adds long-term value. I hope more developers will raise their heads above the parapet. From our point of view, it's a win-win situation.' Visit www.savebritainsheritage.org

Up, up and away

THE sight of a Spitfire, mechanical hero of the Battle of Britain, swooping through our skies is certain to stir the most cynical heart, yet, until now, there has been no permanent memorial to the fighter plane, nor the people who designed, built or flew it. Now, the National Spitfire Project intends to build a monument to the Supermarine Spitfire in Mayflower Park, Southampton, Hampshire, the city where the aircraft was built. Designed by Nick Hancock, it will comprise a stainless-steel vapour trail, soaring 131ft into the air, with a silver Spitfire atop, 1½ times the size of the original aircraft, with a 55ft wingspan. It will rise from a circle resembling an RAF roundel that will include the roundels of all 31 nations that flew the Spitfire in the Second World War, with a Merlin engine under glass at its heart.

How the Spitfire will soar again in Hampshire

'Veterans are few in number and, sadly and inevitably, dwindling,' says Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton. 'The Spitfire's enduring relevance is one of foresight, preparation, excellence and adaptation… the Spitfire story is our story; we forget it at our peril.' The monument aims to inspire the engineers of the future, with STEM educational resources, audio stories and collaborations with local cadets and students. 'If I can inspire people just by looking at it, then I've done my job,' believes Mr Hancock.

Work on the monument is planned to begin in November and fundraising for the £6 million needed continues, with £4,270,500 raised so far; of that, the Government has committed £3 million. For more information and to donate, visit www.nationalspitfiremonument.com *OP*

Blackbird singing in the dead of night

SADLY, the once familiar sound of blackbirds singing in the early morning, at sunset, or even 'in the dead of night' as the Beatles song goes, has become increasingly scarce in recent years, finds the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). Interestingly, the songbird fares best in the North-West of England, the band's homeland, but they are struggling in London and the South-East, perhaps due to the mosquito-borne Usutu virus that arrived in the summer of 2020.

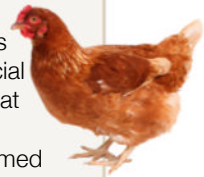
Last year's pioneering Blackbirds in Gardens survey was helpful, but the BTO is seeking even more volunteers this year so researchers can better understand the problem. 'There is now evidence of a wider decline in Southern England, not seen in other UK regions. This survey seeks to understand why this change is happening,' explains senior research ecologist Hugh Hanmer. The survey runs to September; visit https://www.bto.org to take part.

A team of four volunteers, including house and collections officer Lucy Cooper (*pictured*), is celebrating the completion of a 10-year conservation project to the library at Stourhead, Wiltshire. It saw them painstakingly add special protective coverings to the entire collection of some 6,500 books, shielding them from dust and light damage

Good week for

Working at Country Life
Two extraordinary opportunities have arisen to join the staff of Country Life; we are currently seeking a News & Property Editor and maternity cover for our Luxury Editor. See next week's issue for more information or visit www.futureplc.com/careers

Hen parties
The British Hen Welfare Trust is celebrating 20 years of saving former commercial hens from slaughter; in that time, more than a million chickens have been rehomed



White-faced darters
The rare dragonfly species will be introduced to a carefully managed wetland habitat at RSPB Campfield Marsh, Cumbria, to help create a new population and reverse severely declining numbers

Nettles for corncrakes
Bags of nettles from across Northern Ireland have been shipped to Rathlin Island to create tall vegetation that will support endangered corncrakes and encourage them to breed

Reconnecting the Rede
About 25 acres of wetland have been created on the banks of the River Rede, Northumberland, reconnecting about one-third of a mile of water to its historic floodplain and increasing breeding habitat for salmon, trout and freshwater pearl mussel

Musical bears
Paddington The Musical will have its world premiere at the Savoy Theatre, London WC2, in November. Tickets go on sale in May; marmalade sandwiches welcome

Bad week for

Shrewsbury Flower Show
Shropshire Horticultural Society has announced the cancellation of this year's show, scheduled for August, due to unsustainable costs. It has been running since 1875

Nesting swans
An island at Swan Valley Lakes, Hampshire, has been closed off after a catapult attack on a swan ***AEW***

Behind the secret-garden door

ONCE the sole preserve of Larry the cat and whomsoever he happens to be chaperoning—our Chief Mouser to the Cabinet Office currently cohabits with his sixth Prime Minister—the gardens at 10, Downing Street, London SW1, will open via the London Open Gardens weekend. Larry will likely make himself scarce as visitors, who can gain access via a free public ballot to two tours on Saturday, June 7, admire the sweeping lawn, rose beds and Dame Barbara Hepworth sculpture in the garden that has been a haven for world leaders since 1736.

Among 111 green spaces across the capital, others new in 2025 include Battersea Rooftop Gardens, one of the largest of its kind in London, whereas returning for the first time since 2017 are the 18th-century gardens of Marlborough House, SW1, designed by Sir Christopher Wren and now the Commonwealth Secretariat HQ, where there is a revolving summerhouse commissioned by Queen Mary and a pet cemetery that contains the graves of Queen Alexandra's dogs Muff, Tiny and Joss, as well as a bunny called Benny. Also, 20 ballot winners will be invited to glimpse 'behind the scenes' at London Zoo, Regent's Park, where the horticulture team will explain how to plant a jungle to suit a Sumatran tiger. Other returning favourites include 25 Cannon Street, EC4, overlooking St Paul's, and the seven-acre Charterhouse Gardens, EC1, within Tudor walls.

Above: **Debut: Battersea Rooftop Gardens.**
Left: **Larry, the Cabinet Office Chief Mouser**

Now in its 26th year, London Open Gardens is run by (and in support of) London Parks and Gardens Trust. 'Our mission is to protect London's green spaces old and new; to ensure they can be enjoyed by future generations and to make them more accessible,' explains director Tim Webb, who points out only 18% of green spaces in the capital are accessible to the public. The Downing Street ballot closes on May 6; visit www.londongardenstrust.org/log2025

Shaggy sheep stories

ALARM bells are ringing for two of Britain's most distinctive native-breed sheep, which have been re-categorised as 'priority'—in need of urgent recovery action—on the annual Watchlist drawn up by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST). The Leicester longwool sheep, with its luxurious fleece of rastafarian ringlets, was once integral to rural Britain's wealth; it is still popular with smallholders and wool-spinners, but the number of ewes producing pedigree lambs in 2024 was down by 29% year on year and there is a continuing decline in its effective population size marker, a measure of genetic diversity. The striking, multi-horned Manx Loaghtan, which was rescued from near oblivion in the 1950s, has similarly declined.

The number of Leicester longwool ewes producing lambs is down 29%

All native goat breeds are in trouble and the continuing problem of avian flu, as well as rising costs of keep, is affecting all native poultry breeds. The RBST is calling on Defra to reinstate the previous Conservative Government's strategic, round-table approach to recovery across departments and breed societies; this has produced good results for Gloucester cattle and the Large White pig. 'Our concern is deepening for others among the UK's irreplaceable native breeds,' says RBST chief executive Christopher Price. 'Both the Leicester longwool and the Manx Loaghtan pay testament to the fantastic and invaluable diversity within the UK's native sheep breeds.' *KG*

Going up

- Gloucester cattle
- Original population Lincoln Red cattle
- Large White pig
- British Landrace pig
- Llanwenog sheep
- Devon & Cornwall longwool sheep
- Welsh Section B pony
- Fell pony
- Cleveland Bay horse

Going down

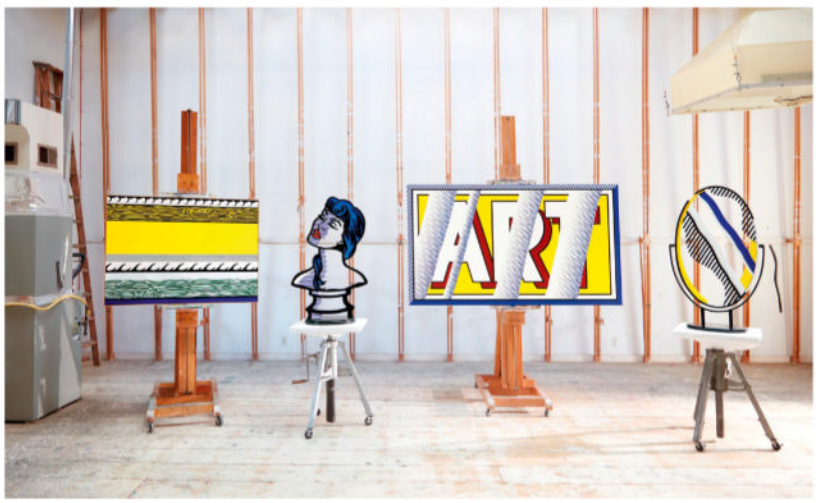
- White Park cattle
- Large Black pig
- British Lop pig
- Hackney horse and pony

Paul Barker; Getty; Zachary Culpin/BNPS; Alamy; Aaron Hargreaves/Foster + Partners; RHS/Ollie Dixon; Estate of Roy Lichtenstein

A dog-leg route

TOGETHER, Monty Don and his golden retriever, Ned (*above*), have designed a garden for the RHS Chelsea Flower Show—a doggy first for the event. Plantsman Jamie Butterworth, who is creating the RHS and Radio 2 Dog Garden with Mr Don, laid it all out at his nursery, Form Plants in Surrey, then invited Ned to run through all the pots and plants to create pathways to make it 'as authentic as possible'. 'Ned followed his nose and forged the routes that we will now copy at the show,' explains Mr Butterworth. 'We had imagined that Ned would create sweeps and curves through the planting or, at least, that is what we had designed. However, every time he ran off, he returned to Monty via the same route and, as such, we have changed the designs… So Ned actually designed not only part of the garden, but possibly the most detailed and complex aspect.'

Clare Matterson, RHS director-general, adds: 'As a nation of gardeners and dog lovers, we hope this garden makes people smile both when they hear about it and when they see it.' RHS Chelsea Flower Show, London SW3, runs from May 20–24.



A 'phenomenal group' of 40 works across four decades from the collection of Dorothy and Roy Lichtenstein will go under the hammer at Sotheby's, New York, US, next month, with a collective estimate of excess $35 million (just over £26m). 'I'll let art historians speak about the loftier aspects of my father's work, but what I most appreciate is the sense of humour embedded in all of it. It's a wry humour that was part of who he was every day,' comments Mitchell Lichtenstein. A selection of Roy Lichtenstein's artworks are pictured in his Southampton studio (www.sothebys.com)

Country Mouse

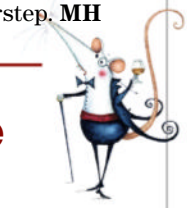
The animals' picnic

BANK holidays add a frisson of intensity to producing an issue of COUNTRY LIFE in four days instead of the usual five, but they also provide extra time for the garden. With the ever earlier and louder dawn chorus acting as an alarm call each morning, much has been achieved.

Mine, apart from a bedraggled ornamental grass in which a robin has laid five brown-speckled eggs, is looking pruned, clipped and ready for May's supercharged growth. This is the moment in the year that I have been waiting for.

When I was a boy, growing up near Pangbourne in Berkshire, our neighbours had a beautiful garden, full of little, linked ponds with chubby carp, an apple tree that I was allowed to climb to reach that rosiest of fruit right at the top and, most wondrously of all, a pair of robins that, whenever the garden owners whistled, would come to feed on wriggly mealworms cupped in their hands.

My mother, for many years, had a toad that lived under a stone in her greenhouse. Although not as impressive as hand-feeding robins, the toad was a demon on slugs and other pests. The grandchildren were absolutely fascinated by it and would leave worms as offerings on the toad's doorstep. **MH**



Town Mouse

Knead to know

EASTER may be over for another year, but Londoners' mania for hot cross buns shows no sign of abating. Once only baked and eaten on Good Friday, they are now subject to the same mission-creep as mince pies and Easter eggs, segueing into full-blown spring. For once, this seasonal purist doesn't disapprove: hot cross buns hit a sweet spot between spiced heft and picnic-friendly portability, making them an ideal exit ramp from winter comfort eating.

The current crop of artisan hot cross buns are miniature masterpieces, with the city's bakeries vying to outdo each other: think candied Amalfi lemon peel and Earl Grey-soaked sultanas, crosses made from croissant offcuts and glistening ginger-syrup glazes. Subjecting the results to the whims of the average crumb-clogged toaster feels like vandalism.

Supply never quite meets demand, with scenes ensuing in bakeries last seen when bread went on the ration in 1946. I found myself setting an antisocially early alarm on Saturday morning and sprinting through Waterloo station to get my hands on a box of hot cross buns from Toklas Bakery just off the Strand. Burnished and furnished and only minutes out of the oven, they were well worth the early start. They're still on sale this weekend, but you'll have to get your skates on: bun, don't walk. **EH**

Edited by Victoria Marston

Quiz of the week

1) Which Essex city is famous for its oyster festival?
2) What colour is the gemstone peridot?
3) Brandy, orange liqueur and lemon juice make which cocktail?
4) Which birds have little ringed, grey and golden species?
5) What term is used for material that is cut diagonally across the grain of the fabric?

Riddle me this

In cubic feet, how much dirt is there in a hole that measures 2ft by 3ft by 4ft?

1) Colchester 2) Green 3) A sidecar 4) Plovers 5) Bias cut.
Riddle me this: None (it's a hole)

A bug's life

Yellow dung fly (*Scathophaga stercoraria*)

DOES 'scramble competition on a cowpat' sound appealing to you? Welcome to the world of the yellow dung fly. The advance plan is that girl meets boy on fresh dung, where she will lay eggs. The reality is that she meets lots of boys, all at once, and there is unseemly competition between them. As they scramble for access, she can be collateral damage, sometimes being injured and at best being pressed down into the excrement. If all goes well, she will copulate with her chosen male—and get out alive.

From 'An Insect a Day' by Dominic Couzens and Gail Ashton (Batsford, £22)

100 years ago in COUNTRY LIFE May 2, 1925

THE greatest change of the year, the most miracle-like, is taking place at this moment in woods and hedgerows. Only a week or two ago the trees and bushes stood entirely bare. Even now there are bleak hillsides where the green fire of life has not spread; but almost everywhere the eye has already seen a change pass upon the trees. It was at first a nothing, a faintest hue. They had lost something of the sharpness of their outlines; a mist of green had touched the branches. And then that mist has become a jewelling of green buds and then bright points of green a-flutter, and some hardy early-comer, such as the elder bush impatient to be bearing her creamy trays of blossoms, stands leaf-clad from topmost twig to lowest, and gives the clue to what has been happening everywhere.

Time to buy

***The Night Circus* by Erin Morgenstern: this sumptuous edition of the modern fairy tale features colour illustrations by Cristina Bencina,** £70, The Folio Society (020–7400 4200; www.foliosociety.com)

Canine Cupcakes 9 Pack: the perfect present for a pampered pooch, £8, Ruffingtons (0800 098 8057; www.ruffingtons.co.uk)

On this day... April 30, 2009

Met Office forecasters predicted that the UK was 'odds on for a barbecue summer', with temperatures above 30°C and 'near or below average' rainfall. After a soggy July and August, officials maintained that people *had* managed more barbecues than in the preceding two washout summers, concluding: 'Seasonal forecasting is still a new science.'

A novel note

'He wondered whether in fact, he had always been an outsider in the family, and whether he had so placed himself, or whether his parents and sisters had so elected him'
***The Elected Member,* Bernice Rubens**

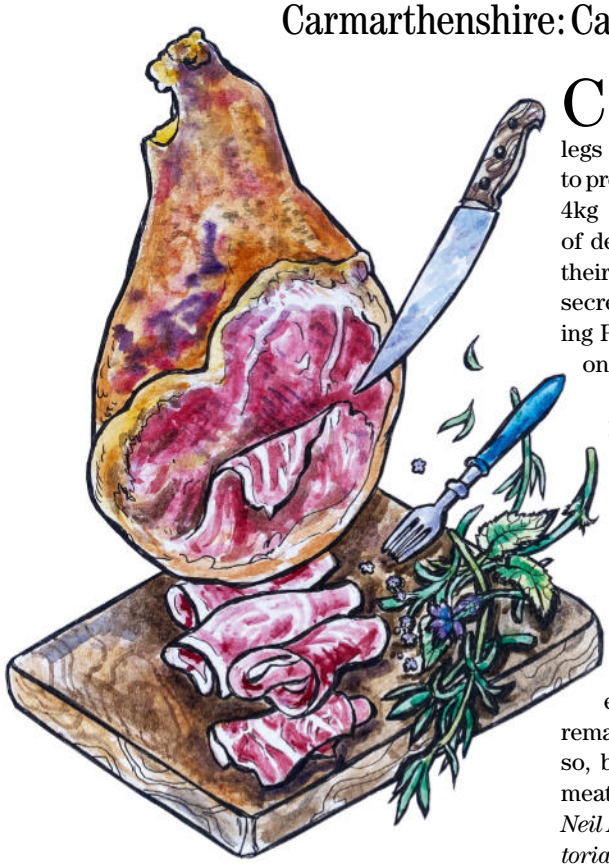
Poet's corner

'The glory of the beauty
of the morning,—
The cuckoo crying over
the untouched dew;
The blackbird that has
found it; and the dove
That tempts me on to
something sweeter
than love'
***The Glory,* Edward Thomas**

Alex Hyde/naturepl.com; North News & Pictures Ltd; Chuhail/Dreamstime.com; *Vers les Tropiques*, Oil on canvas, H80cm x W80cm, 1994. Image courtesy of David Messum Fine Art Ltd; Annabelle King/Future Plc

The taste of Britain

Carmarthenshire: Carmarthen ham



CARMARTHEN ham is the last survivor of an ancient Welsh dry-cured meat culture. Whole legs of pork are cured in salt for several months to produce a close-textured ham weighing between 4kg and 5kg, with rose-pink meat and plenty of delicious, silky white fat. It is said that, after their occupation of Britain, the Romans took the secrets of Carmarthen ham-making home, creating Parma ham. Sadly, this is untrue—the Welsh only ate their hams cooked, not raw.

However, things have changed in recent years and the number of local producers began to dwindle as European charcuterie gained in popularity. The last producer of Carmarthen ham, the Carmarthen Deli run by the Rees family (01267 231204; www.carmarthendeli.co.uk), now cures it for an extra three months so that the meat *can* be eaten raw. A prized artisanal product, the ham gained PGI status in 2016 and is a wonderful example of a traditional food adapting to remain relevant to changing tastes—and in doing so, becoming one of the few indigenous cured meats in the British charcuterie movement.

Neil Buttery is an award-winning author, food historian and chef. Illustration by Kateryna Kyslitska

Unmissable events

April 30–May 23 'Jean-Marie Toulgouat (1927–2006) Rediscovered Works From the Studio Estate' (*pictured*), David Messum Fine Art, Bury Street, London SW1. Early canvases from the great-grandson of Claude Monet, who grew up at Giverny in France (020–7287 4448; www.messums.com)

May 14–26 Charleston Festival, Charleston in Firle, East Sussex. With Nick Clegg on AI, Grayson Perry on the evolution of art and Richard E. Grant on his life and career (01323 811626; www.charleston.org.uk)

May 17–June 1 Exmoor Nature Festival, various venues, Somerset/Devon. New this year, comprising more than 50 events celebrating wildlife, well-being and the beauty of the National Park (01398 323665; www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk)

May 18 Plant Fair, Holywell Leisure Centre, Flintshire. Explore plant stalls from the Hardy Plant Society Clwyd and invited nurseries (01386 710317; www.hardy-plant.org.uk)

Book now

June 12–21 The Northern Aldborough Festival, various venues, North Yorkshire. Opera and classical music, with star act violinist Tamsin Waley-Cohen (www.aldboroughfestival.co.uk)

May 4 and 11 Scape Lodge, Golcar, West Yorkshire
Possibly the highest garden to open for the NGS, Scape Lodge is set at 1,000ft on the Pennines with magnificent views. This steeply sloping one-third-acre site also has borders and containers packed with tulips, as well as many other unusual spring treasures (www.ngs.org.uk).

Wine o'clock

Potpourri and liquorice

Asda, The Wine Atlas Bonarda, San Juan, Argentina, 2024. £6.47, Asda, alc 13.5%

This good-value Argentinian red is made primarily from the Bonarda grape variety. It's perfumed and intense with a concentration of red fruits, potpourri and some liquorice. A tricky wine with food, but could work well with Sichuan cuisine or a peppery steak.

Visit www.decanter.com

Time for tea

Boh Cameronian

The countryside is blooming, making it the perfect setting for an alfresco afternoon tea. At the heart of the spread is Malaysia's Boh Cameronian, a tea that captures the richness of the Cameron Highlands and is known for its brisk, robust flavour and a touch of citrus. The Boh tea estate, owned by the Russell family since its founding 96 years ago, is a cornerstone of Malaysian tea heritage. A connection to English tea was forged in 2003, when members of the Russell family visited the first tea factory in the UK.

How to serve

Brew 2½g of Boh Cameronian Gold Blend in boiling water for four minutes. Add milk or sugar for a creamier taste. Its bold character and refreshing qualities make it a perfect choice with elderflower scones or rhubarb tart.

Where to buy

Boh tea is available direct for about £33, including UK delivery (00 605 493 1324; www.bohtea.com). Alternatively, ask at specialist shops.

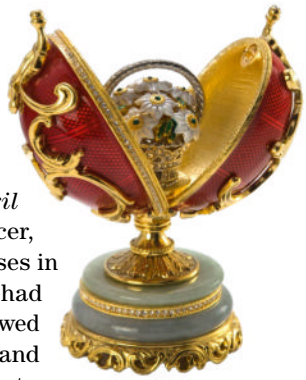
Jonathon Jones tastes tea and exports English-grown tea worldwide

Letters to the Editor

Mark Hedges

Letter of the week

Petal theft



YOUR accounts of Fabergé sales reminded me of an incident I dealt with in the 1980s (*Art market*, *April 16*). Then a police officer, I was called to a premises in Chelsea where there had been a break in. I interviewed the lady of the house and inspected the point of entry by the burglar—a windowsill where there was a large, muddy boot print. I asked the owner, noting the threadbare carpets and shabby furniture, if there was anything of value that had been taken. She replied in a grand voice, 'I don't think so dear, but at least he didn't get the Fabergé flowers', as she pointed to the delicate flower spray, right next to the boot print. *Helen Jones*, *Swansea*

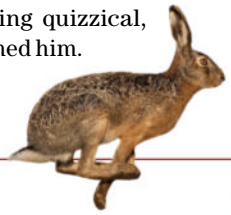
The writer of the letter of the week will win a bottle of Pol Roger Brut Réserve Champagne

Never imitate, always innovate

YOUR feature on Cartier (*'Sparkling society'*, *March 26*) brought to mind words penned 101 years earlier by Henry 'Chips' Channon in his diary entry of March 5, 1924: 'Lunched and dined at Eresby House—an older luncheon, Mrs Cavendish-Bentinck dripping with jewels and bowed down by age, she looked like a ferret that has got loose in Cartier's.' Simon Heffer's magisterial edition of these diaries presents us with a further scurrilous gem on April 5, 1949, when Channon comments that 'the Queen's bosom was enormous and covered with "important pieces" —like a tray at Cartier's'. *Emma*, *Lady Cleobury*, *Shropshire*

Close inspection

AFTER enjoying every word of your Easter issue, I turned back to the front cover to relish again the enchanting picture. As I admired the hare and congratulated myself on locating the ladybird, I realised the wheat in the image is nearly ripe. It isn't an Easter hare—it's an August, or even a September hare. No wonder Mr Hare is looking quizzical, you've mis-seasoned him. *Fennie Strange*, *Gloucestershire*



Decorative difference

COULD you please explain to Freddy (*Tottering-by-Gently*, *April 16*) that Great-Aunt Batty is working away at needlepoint and not a tapestry? Tapestry is made by weaving coloured threads: the weft threads are horizontal and the warp threads are woven in and out of these vertically—this produces a fabric. Needlepoint is yarn that is stitched through stiff, open weave canvas to produce the type of design his great-aunt is making. *Sally Machin*, *Nottinghamshire*

Save St Peter's

I ENJOYED your article on St Mary's (*'The power and the glory'*, *April 16*). We are pleased to have our own Midlands jewel of a chapel here at Steane in Northamptonshire. Since 1752, we have held six Evensong services a year at St Peter's. As there is no electricity, we rely on the light and warm summer evenings to hold our services, with our organist bravely pumping the harmonium for our hymnody. Many have enjoyed joining us for these services of song and prayer amid the rolling parkland of Steane Park. However, due to worries about the roof and the pressure on funds to run both the chapel and the parish church of Most Holy Trinity in Hinton-in-the-Hedges, this may be the last year in which we can offer services—the future looks uncertain at best. *Revd George Frost*, *Northamptonshire*

Past tents

PATRICK GALBRAITH claims that our legal action was to make 'wild camping officially banned on the moor' (*'One man's playground'*, *April 16*). Not true: this was not an attempt to ban camping. Rather, we sought clarification of the law, as we believe that the 1985 Dartmoor Commons Act did not give the public a right to camp. There is a crucial and consequential difference. If we are right (the Supreme Court has not handed down its judgement) the public may not have a right; but it does not make camping illegal. This matter is important because managing a SSSI with heritage and farming interests is difficult with both hands tied behind our backs. *Alexander Darwall*, *Devon*

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(photographs welcome)

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Getty; Alamy; Dan Lowe

Going native

DESPITE universal concern about the pernicious presence of Japanese knotweed, the current prevalence of another invasive plant, alexanders (*Smyrnium olusatrum*) is deeply worrying. Introduced to Britain by the Romans, it threatens to take over. When *Monty Python's Life of Brian* joked 'what have the Romans ever done for us?', the writers hadn't anticipated the negative impact of the beastly plant called alexanders.
Percy Grainger, Suffolk

Flower power

YOUR delightful article reminded me of my uncle (*'Get me to the church on thyme'*, *April 16*). As the newly arrived rector of a country parish, he bravely tackled the lifeless, dusty, plastic sprays and posies that resided in the church. His strategy was simple. He started bringing armfuls of wild blooms from glebeland, verges and hedgerows.

Others were inspired to follow his example, offering their gardens' finest, to join the displays. They were so vibrant and fragrant, the plastic replicas seemed to fade into the background. Eventually they disappeared altogether, unmourned.
Penelope Gainsford, by email

COUNTRY LIFE
MAY 7
Crafts in the Cotswolds, from shoes to stones, plus Nature's ephemeral stars, memories of VE Day and heroines of the SOE

The world was his parish

JORGE MARIO BERGOGLIO brought his own fresh insight to almost all that he did. The world was his parish and he spoke directly to it. Popes communicate officially by encyclicals—carefully honed letters brought together with the help of the best minds in the Vatican. Usually, more than two-thirds is written by these experts and the Pope moulds the rest. Yet, when Pope Francis produced his historic encyclical, *Laudato Si*, in 2015, the position was reversed. The experts checked and confirmed accuracy and completeness, but Pope Francis wrote most of it. That is why it reads as a personal testament. It's clearly not a compilation, but a plea from the heart.

Pope Francis loved the natural world and rejoiced in the whole of creation. For him, it was God-given, offered in 'good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over' and yet he recognised clearly that humans are on course to destroy it. He saw that we had polluted the air, the rivers and the seas; cut down vast tracts of forest and everywhere destroyed biodiversity; we had continued to treat others as inferiors—fit only to do the will of the powerful; and our unique species had dominated the planet. Whatever we want, we take, with no thought for the future. Pope Francis understood climate change as the symptom of what mankind is doing to the world. He saw it as the planet crying out for healing as rising temperatures threatened to overwhelm it and he saw us, being human, ignoring the danger and carrying on regardless.

> 'Something special was happening when the first Jesuit Pope chose Francis as his name'

The effect of *Laudato Si* was and remains remarkable. Even the non-religious recognise the wisdom and scholarship it contains and many are captured by the person who comes across in its 246 lucid paragraphs. Together with the update Pope Francis wrote five years later, it makes the most compelling case for governments, institutions and individuals to act before it is too late. It continues to spur millions to seek a new way for the world to operate—a way that would provide for our needs without destroying the planet.

The title *Laudato Si* comes direct from St Francis's writings and, as we look back over the late Pope's pontificate, we realise what we should have seen earlier: something special was happening when the first Jesuit Pope chose Francis as his name, decided to stay in his humble apartments and refused to move to grander accommodation or to don what he saw as unnecessarily fussy clothes. We can now see that, right from the start, his was a Franciscan agenda, expounded with the authentic ring of the Gospels. Yet, it was not until the publication of *Laudato Si* that the seal was set on his pontificate.

This transformative document recalled us to a proper reverence for the planet that gives us life. It set the agenda for regenerative farming, for cultivation and husbandry, working with Nature, protecting and replenishing the soil, treating animals with respect and recognising our obligations to other human beings. Yes, these are concepts that would be recognised down the centuries as central to the Christian message, but Pope Francis gave them new urgency and a freshness and relevance that had been missing, a message we are all still loath to heed.

In the generally admiring obituaries of this, the 266th Pope, much was written about his reforming views, his appeal to ordinary people, his love of the poor and his criticism of unrestricted capitalism. Pope Francis's enormous influence and stature was widely recognised. In this splintered world, bereft of leadership, he leaves us *Laudato Si*, in which he calls on us to change, to embrace creation and respect our fellow human beings before it is too late.

Athena
Cultural Crusader

Greater than the sum of its parts

ON November 9, 1940, a fire devastated the central block of Castle Howard, North Yorkshire, one of the masterpieces of the English Baroque. The process of restoration was begun by George Howard, who took the crucial and heroic decision to move back into the house in 1949 after its wartime requisition as a school. He rebuilt the central dome in the 1960s and restored some of the damaged interiors in the 1980s in a modern evocation of the Baroque. Last week, Athena was privileged to attend the unveiling of the most recent stage in the renewal of the house, which has been overseen by its present custodians, Nicholas and Victoria Howard. This comprises the ambitious representation of several of its most important interiors, as well as the unveiling of the newly restored Tapestry Drawing Room. The work will be illustrated and discussed in the magazine in the future, but it so resonates with the themes of this special issue—the renaissance of the country house—that it is worth celebrating here, too.

> ‘Each generation must actively strive to make the building speak to them’

The Tapestry Drawing Room has stood as a gutted shell ever since the fire, but its eponymous tapestries—depictions of the Four Seasons that were specially woven for the space in 1706 by John Vanderbank—survived in the house. Returning them to their original position, however, presented one seemingly insuperable difficulty: the original detailing of the room was complex to reconstruct for lack of evidence. To cut this Gordian knot, the architect Francis Terry was commissioned to design a modern interior in the spirit of Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor. Athena first saw his design for the fireplace and cornice nearly two years ago, strikingly reproduced at full scale within the room. It’s a reminder of how long and carefully planned this project has been. Last week, she saw the interior fully and triumphantly realised with craftsmanship of the highest quality. As redecorated, it creates a spectacular interior in harmony with the character of the house and unlocks the circulation within the building.

The return of the tapestries has been naturally bound up with a wider reorganisation of the furnishings and paintings in the house. As part of this, the Long Gallery has been completely redecorated and rehung on the advice of Alec Cobbe. No less striking is the reimagining of the Grand Staircase with antique sculpture in the form both of originals and plaster casts. Every aspect of the work described has benefited from the expertise of the long-standing curator of Castle Howard, Christopher Ridgway.

Of course, the task of restoring this great house will never be finished. That’s not only a reflection of its size or importance, but of the reality that each generation must actively strive to make the building and its collections speak to them. In the process, they also make it live afresh and add another layer to its history. That’s why—fundamentally—country houses are so much greater than the sum of their parts.

The way we were Photographs from the COUNTRY LIFE archive

1922 **Unpublished**

This photograph of an unidentified woman sitting in the garden of Lees Court, Kent, was probably taken when the house was covered by COUNTRY LIFE in two articles published in August 1922. She looks soulful and seems to be holding a handwritten diary.

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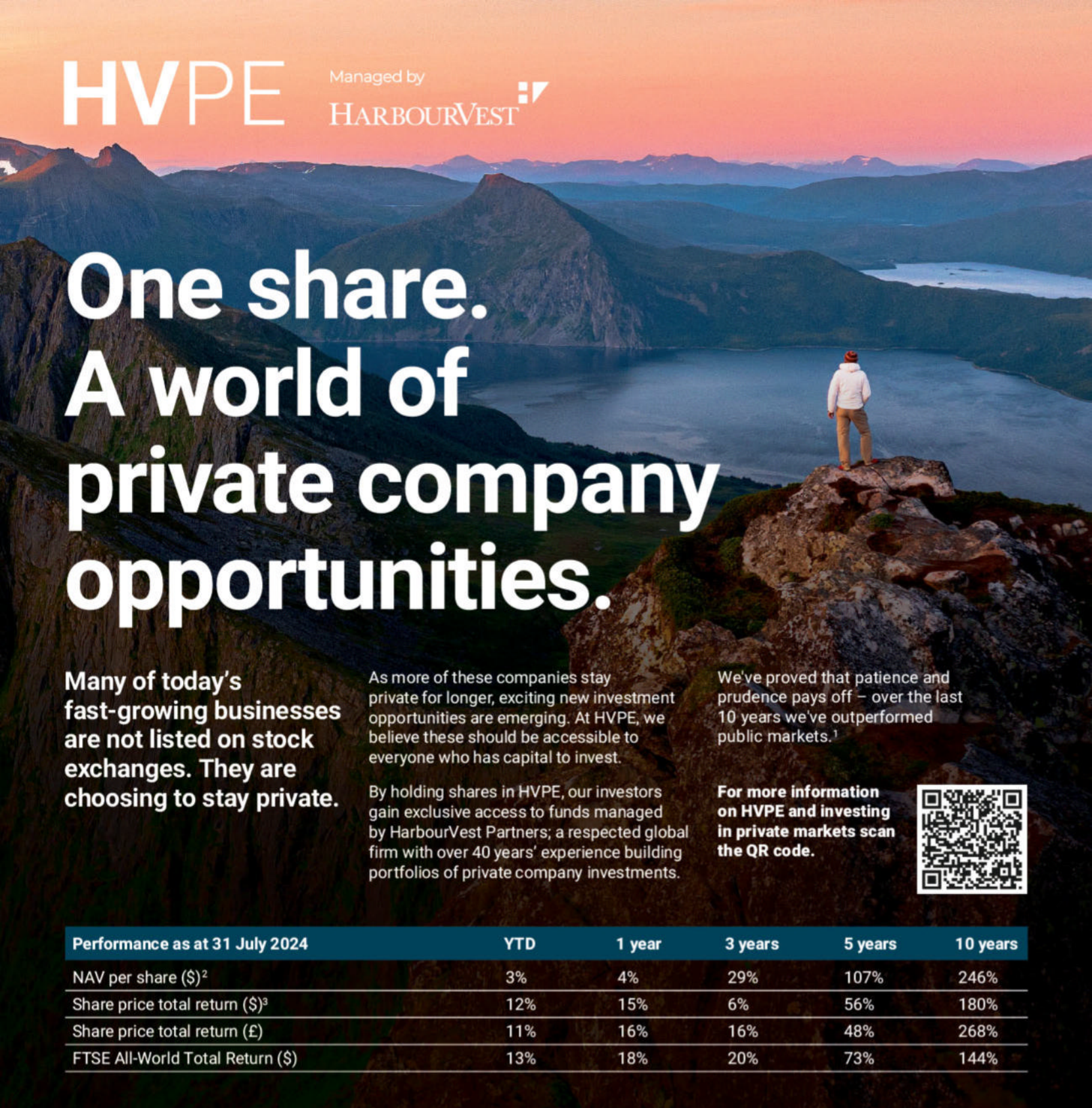

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1 Over the ten years to 31 July 2024, the US dollar NAV per share compound annual growth rate ("CAGR") was 13% and the public market comparator (the FTSE All-World Total Return Index) CAGR was 9%.

2 Please also note the "NAV per share" percentages in the table above reflect the US dollar monthly estimated NAV per share.

3 HVPE introduced an additional US dollar share price on 10 December 2018; from this date onwards, the actual US dollar share price, as reported by the London Stock Exhange, has been used. Prior to this date, the US dollar share price had been converted from the sterling share price at the prevailing exchange rate. The share price total return figures have been adjusted for the redemptions which occurred in October 2013 and October 2014.

My favourite painting Stuart Procter

The schoolmaster by René Magritte

Stuart Procter is the CEO of The Beaumont Mayfair hotel, London W1

‘I’ve always been captivated by the enigmatic nature of this piece, which gives our bar at The Beaumont Mayfair its name: Le Magritte Bar. In true Surrealist style, there’s a real air of mystery to the figure—we don’t see his face and, although the painting’s title tells us he’s a schoolmaster, we view him from behind, outlined beneath a thin crescent moon. It’s a painting that both commands attention and invites conversation; as viewers, we’re left to fill in the blanks, such as why Magritte situates him in a nocturnal landscape. It’s this intrigue that makes it the perfect centrepiece for Le Magritte Bar and it is always the first thing I point out to our guests on arrival’

***The schoolmaster*, 1954, oil on canvas, 35½in by 25½in, by René Magritte (1898–1967), private collection**

Charlotte Mullins comments on *The schoolmaster*

RENÉ MAGRITTE’S *The schoolmaster* confounds us. What is the bowler-hatted man doing, staring out towards a fine sliver of a crescent moon? It suggests night-time, but we can still make out the distant skyline of houses and a smattering of foreground rocks on barren ground. The sky is still blue—perhaps it is twilight? Or is it still daytime after all?

The Belgian painter probed everyday life to reveal its surreal underbelly. He was initially influenced by Italian proto-Surrealist Giorgio di Chirico and his splicing of objects—a classical statue, a dropped glove—that became strange by association. Once Magritte became a painter full time in 1926, however, he distanced himself from Di Chirico. He didn’t turn towards the subconscious as the French Surrealists did: rather, he took his cues from the world around him. He had trained in commercial design and knew how to make an image grab your attention. Using a flat, illustrative style, he played with scale and turned night into day, developing a lexicon of favourite motifs that included a blue sky filled with fluffy white clouds, a burning candle, a brown pipe and a bowler-hatted man.

In *The schoolmaster*, this everyman stands with his back to us, but in other paintings he faces us, his face obscured by a green apple or a white dove. At times, he rains down from the sky in multiple copies and it’s easy to see Magritte’s legacy when we think of the clones of Agent Smith in the ‘Matrix’ films.

Fine Art Images/Bridgeman Images

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A rose by any other name

- Spry, who wrote 13 books, had a colourful personal life: she took the name of 'Shav' Spry without being wed (he was already married to another) and had an affair with the painter Hannah 'Gluck' Gluckstein
- In 1945, she opened Winkfield Place, the Berkshire arm of Le Cordon Bleu cookery school, in partnership with the chef Rosemary Hume, and taught flower arranging and etiquette
- She was honoured with a blue plaque at No 64, South Audley Street, London W1, in 2012
- In 1961, David Austin named his first English rose, a pink one, after her

CONSTANCE SPRY, who became the most sought-after flower arranger for London Society, originally studied hygiene and nursing in Ireland, was a lecturer for the Irish Woman's National Health Association and worked as a secretary of the Dublin Red Cross during the First World War. Following an ill-fated marriage, she relocated to London in 1921 to become a headmistress and took up flower arranging as a hobby.

Unconfined by formal training, Spry (1886–1960) combined classic flowers with moss, twigs and hedgerow flowers and introduced orchids and magnolias, all loosely arranged at different heights and angles—a marked departure from the compact uniformity of Victorian bouquets. She was soon in demand for parties. The first formal commission came in 1927 from Sidney Bernstein, owner of Grenada Cinemas, who wanted weekly arrangements for his foyers. Atkinson's perfumery in Old Bond Street followed, where it is said police were called to monitor the crowds that were marvelling at the unconventional displays of roses and red kale.

Constance Spry's namesake rose blossoms in midsummer

In 1929, Spry opened Flower Decorations in Pimlico, where her creative spirit flourished. She foraged for foliage, put vegetables in vases and dipped flowers in wax, creating vast arrangements akin to Dutch Master paintings. She raided cupboards for jars and tins to use as vases and enlisted Fulham Pottery to create wide-mouthed and boat-shaped bowls to accommodate abundance (they now sell for up to £1,000). In 1933, *Vogue* noted of a wedding: 'The flower decorations in the cathedral by Mrs Spry (one of the essential figures behind the scenes of social life) were all white, with every kind of lily and a little pampas grass.' Spry's career peaked in 1953 when she was commissioned for Elizabeth II's coronation. *AEW*

Getty; Alamy

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The Renaissance of the Country House

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A vibrant era for our country houses

Rather than perceiving the mid 20th century as a troubled period in the history of the country house, **John Martin Robinson** argues that it was perhaps one of the most interesting, unexpected and enterprising

AS the striking title suggests, 'The Destruction of the Country House' exhibition at the V&A Museum, which opened in the winter of 1974/75, aimed to draw attention to the scale of demolitions of historic houses in Britain over the previous 50 years. Its polemic struck home. The shocking display captured the popular imagination and had a significant impact on wider public perceptions and policy. In the process, a much more positive framework for the preservation of historic houses in Britain was established.

The timing of the exhibition was excellent. 1975 had been designated European Architectural Heritage Year, emphasising the importance of the 'built heritage'. There was also a new Labour Government that—despite talk of 'wealth taxes'—introduced the Finance Act of 1976. This made it possible to set up charitable trusts specifically to preserve historic buildings and establish maintenance funds for country houses. Margaret Thatcher's government, which followed in 1979, established the National Heritage Memorial Fund to give substantial grants and Michael Heseltine widened and strengthened the preservation

Fig 1: **Sir William Whitfield's noble Tusmore Park in Oxfordshire, reared in the 1990s on the site of a vanished predecessor house**

net by instigating a comprehensive updating of the lists of historic buildings. Once again, it is now due for further revision.

The V&A exhibition was thus the catalyst for beneficial developments over succeeding decades. In particular, it offered country houses a new place in the public sphere, offering them a *raison d'être* as part of the 'national cultural heritage'. In the process, and funded by a period of relative prosperity, changes begun after the Second World War, with the listing of historic buildings from 1947, the Gowers Report into the future of country houses, the National Trust Country House Scheme, Historic Buildings Council grants and widespread public-opening initiatives, accelerated rapidly. The cumulative result was a remarkable revival in the decades on either side of the millennium and a burst of creative architectural conservation.

Nevertheless, without underestimating the scale of the destruction—nearly 2,000 houses in the middle decades of the 20th century—to some extent the exhibition skewed the picture. The recent history of the country house was not totally negative or as depressing as depicted. After all, the 20th century was an especially destructive era, with two cataclysmic World Wars, sporadic civil wars, vast economic disruption and violent revolution. These affected the whole of British life, the economy and social structures, not only country houses. Historic towns, London townhouses and industrial structures arguably suffered more grievous depredations. Indeed, considering the historical background, it was perhaps surprising that so many country houses, about 7,000, survived into the 1970s.

> 'Considering the background, it was perhaps surprising that so many houses, about 7,000, survived'

The story of mid 20th-century decline is, therefore, nuanced. Many 1950s demolitions were a consequence of requisitioning and neglect. At first, it was difficult to carry out repairs because of the rationing of building materials that had been introduced in 1941 under Defence Regulation 56A (and which the Attlee government perpetuated afterwards). It was only after the Conservatives came to power in 1951 that Harold Macmillan phased that out, making extensive repairs possible.

At the same time, Rab Butler as Chancellor of the Exchequer lowered taxes and introduced mild economic reforms. Attlee had kept war-time protection of agriculture in place and this led to a 30-year rise in farm incomes and the value of land. From the mid 1950s, →

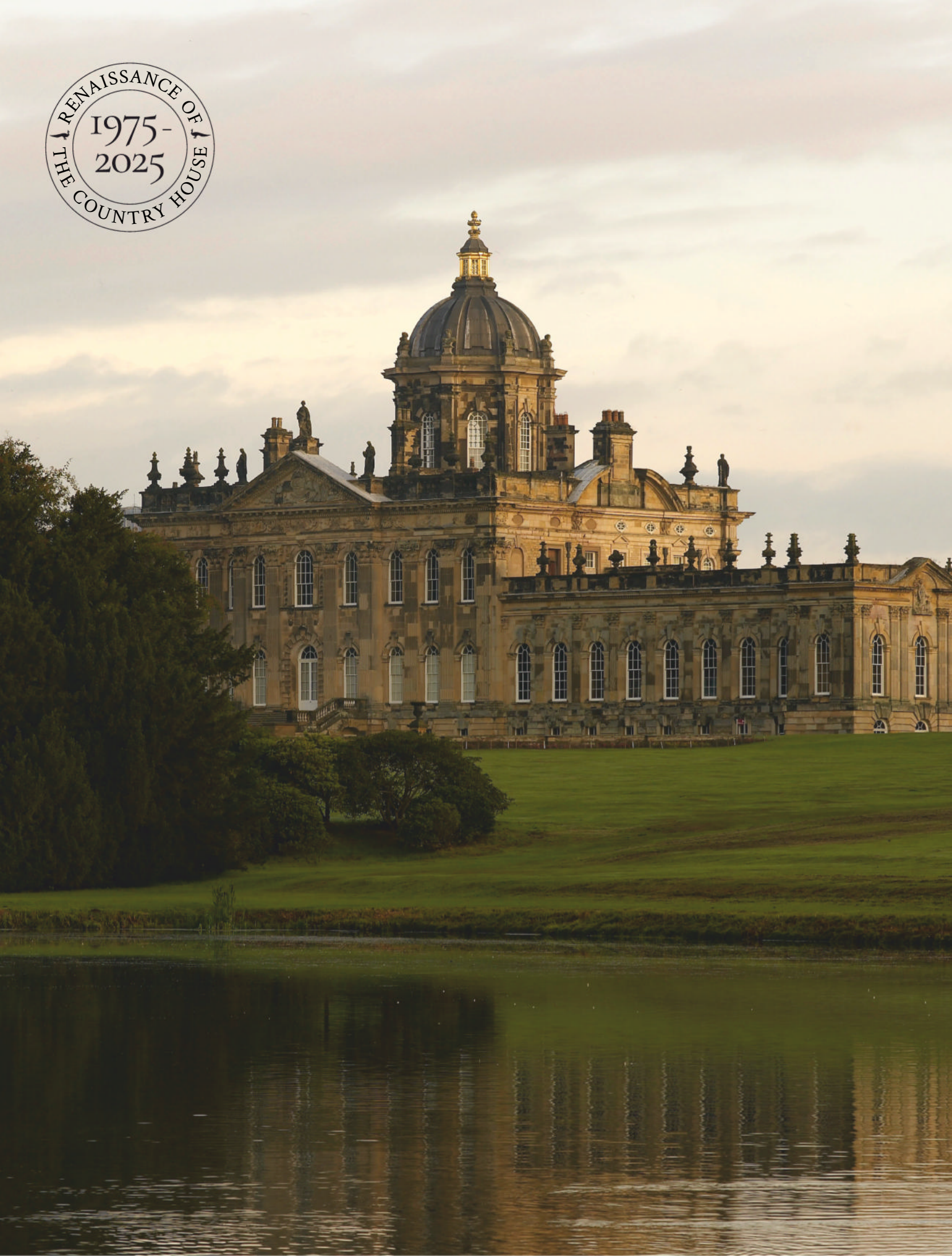
RENAISSANCE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE
1975 - 2025

Fig 2 facing page: **Castle Howard, North Yorkshire, where a tapestry room has just been completed.** *Fig 3 above:* **The cantilever stair of Henbury, Cheshire, by Julian Bicknell**

there was a steady rise in the stock market, too, significant because, since the late 19th century, most landowners had invested a large proportion of their capital in stocks and shares. As a result, despite death duties (avoidable) and relatively high income tax, there was the money and confidence for capital projects.

As a consequence, although demolitions included irreplaceable losses, notably Coleshill in Berkshire, Nuthall Temple in Nottinghamshire, Stoke Edith in Herefordshire and Eaton Hall in Cheshire, nearly all the greatest English country houses survived this period. These included Chatsworth, Derbyshire; Arundel, West Sussex (***Fig 8***); Burghley, Lincolnshire; Blenheim, Oxfordshire; Hatfield, Hertfordshire (***Fig 6***); and Wilton, Wiltshire (***Fig 9***). Not only that, but, as soon as requisitioning ended in 1947, these houses were put together again, their furnishings reassembled and the buildings themselves opened.

The opening of houses to the public after the war was a key development. Houses had, of course, been open to respectable visitors for centuries, but such opening now became a properly run business with entrance charges, the provision of subsidiary facilities and professional management with dedicated staff. Whereas, before the war, entrance charges were given to hospitals and local charities, now they went towards the upkeep of the building itself and paid for running costs, including staff, rates and heating. Opening was encouraged as a condition of Historic Buildings Council grants, which led to increasing numbers of houses welcoming paying visitors.

All the houses that reopened after the war on commercial lines have survived, even if →

Fig 4: **The Octagon Room of Farleigh House, Hampshire, refurnished in 1989**

Fig 5 above: **The hall of Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire, which was re-occupied by the family in the 1950s.** *Fig 6 facing page:* **The King James Drawing Room at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, with paintings hung over tapestry in a scheme conceived by Alec Cobbe**

the family did not themselves move back immediately into the house. Certain owners, led by the Marquess of Bath, the Duke of Bedford and Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, pioneered large-scale 'stately home' businesses attended with much publicity and others followed their lead. Wide car ownership and recreational travel in the 1950s underpinned this new business ethos and house-visiting 'democratised' them, so that they came to be seen as friendly national possessions rather than other worlds belonging to an exclusive social stratosphere. It's a view reflected, for example, in the affectionate cartoons by the likes of Giles in the national press.

The key years in the post-war revival of the English country house were the mid 1950s, when the Dukes of Bedford and Devonshire made the decision to move back respectively into Woburn Abbey (***Fig 5***), Bedfordshire, and Chatsworth and to restore them as lived-in family homes, as well as splendid show places. Many owners—or their wives—found they had a natural flair for running houses as lived in, commercial 'stately homes'. Such was the case with the Marquess of Hertford at Ragley Hall, Warwickshire, George Howard at Castle Howard, North Yorkshire (***Fig 2***), and, above all Debo, Duchess of Devonshire at Chatsworth, demonstrating what could be done against considerable odds.

Losses, meanwhile, actually focused on middling houses in a poor state after the war, including Georgian houses that had been radically altered, Victorian houses, then seen as of little importance, or those situated in industrialised and urbanised areas where people did not want to live. Added to which, a significant number of houses demolished in the 1950s and 1960s were replaced by often well-designed neo-Georgian structures that helped to keep alive the Classical tradition in English architecture when nearly all public and 'social' buildings were resolutely Modernist. New houses of considerable distinction included Okeover Hall in Staffordshire by Marshall Sisson, Kings Walden Bury, Hertfordshire (***Fig 10***), by Raymond Erith and Quinlan Terry, Garrowby, East Yorkshire, by Francis Johnson, Henbury Hall, Cheshire (***Fig 3***), after an idea by Felix Kelly, and Meols Hall, Merseyside, by its owner Roger Hesketh.

The most important houses were gradually restored and opened to the public as tourist destinations. They also adapted to social and technological change with the revolution of the domestic side, the phasing out of live-in servants, the sweeping adaptation of mechanical aids and the transformation of the kitchen into an American-style family room. There has been a continuous programme of scholarly rearrangement and care of the contents and often stylish redecoration by a series of famous decorators—John Fowler, David Hicks, David Mlinaric—who in the process created a style that has been fashionable →

RENAISSANCE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE
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Fig 7 above: **The view from the roof of Houghton Hall in Norfolk, showing the newly planted, 1¾-mile pleached-lime avenues.** *Fig 8 right:* **Arundel Castle, West Sussex, its declining fortunes heroically reversed in the 20th century**

on both sides of the Atlantic, and launched flotillas of colour-illustrated books.

The 1950s laid the base for the exhibition renaissance that followed the V&A and flourished through the 1980s and 1990s and into the 2000s. Those decades saw not only the continuing revival of old-established houses, but the return of places that had been in long-term institutional use to family occupation. Trail blazers were Lord Feversham at Duncombe Park, North Yorkshire, which he refurbished after its years as a girls' school, and the Earl of Portsmouth, who evicted the prep school he had disliked attending from Farleigh House, Hampshire (***Fig 4***), as soon as there was a break clause in the lease.

A major new development was the acquisition of substantial houses and their restoration by the beneficiaries of the Thatcher economic revolution. Every county has splendid examples of salvation by new money. Perhaps even more spectacular was the burst of new houses built by similar patrons, such as, in Oxfordshire, Sir William Whitfield's Tusmore Park (***Fig 1***) for Wafic Said and Philip Jebb's Glympton Park, as well as Nicholas Johnston's ambitious extensions to Wormsley in Buckinghamshire for Sir Paul Getty.

Such new seats were the culmination of a trend that had been continuous from the 1950s onwards. Post-war new country houses were largely constructed in the Classical style and several talented architects specialised in creating them. Doyen Claud Phillimore designed nearly 40 new houses, often with understated exteriors, but beautifully detailed interiors. Francis Johnson of Bridlington, East

Fig 9: **The softly illuminated upper cloister at Wilton in Wiltshire, once again redisplayed with its 17th-century collection of sculpture**

Yorkshire, was responsible for a distinguished group of new houses, such as Settrington in North Yorkshire, Sunderlandwick in East Yorkshire and Hilborough House in Norfolk for the van Cutsem family. Raymond Erith's practice was perpetuated by Quinlan Terry, whose Palladian designs included Waverton House for the Hambros in Gloucestershire. There was also a network of regional specialists in house design, such as Sir Martyn Beckett in Yorkshire, James Fletcher-Watson in Norfolk and Anthony Jaggard in Dorset.

Fig 10: **Kings Walden Bury, Hertfordshire, built in 1971 by Raymond Erith and Quinlan Terry**

The pace and quality of new houses increased after 1980 with a younger generation, including Francis Terry, who worked with his father, Quinlan, on the design of Ferne Park in Wiltshire for Viscount and Viscountess Rothermere, and George Saumarez Smith and Hugh Petter of the ADAM practice based in London and Winchester.

The new houses built in England in the past 30 years on traditional landed estates include buildings of a quality and on a scale to compare to the best work produced by the 'Domestic Revival' before the First World War, which are often seen as the last of their kind. Far from it. Alongside the new-builds, there have been extremely ambitious restorations by their ancestral owners of the greatest historic family seats, of which Arundel Castle, Chatsworth, Burghley, Wilton, Houghton Hall in Norfolk ***(Fig 7)***, Althorp and Apethorpe Palace in Northamptonshire and Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire have all been extensively described and illustrated in Country Life. The scale and quality of what has been achieved since 1975 was not foreseen by the V&A exhibition and makes the work of the past 50 years a high point in the long history of the English country house.

June Buck/Paul Barker/Val Corbett/Will Pryce/Paul Highnam/Country Life Picture Library

Bringing ‘beauty’ back

Lord Deben explains the thinking behind his ‘Gummer’s Law’, which provided for the creation of new country houses within planning law

RENAISSANCE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE 1975-2025

An outstanding house that enhances its setting: oast house-inspired Caring Wood, Kent, by James Macdonald Wright and Niall Maxwell

THERE’S no point in being a cabinet minister if you don’t make a difference and do things that only you would have done. Therefore, when, almost by accident, John Major moved me from Agriculture to the Environment, I realised I had been given a great opportunity. From the first, I had been captivated by buildings.

Brought up in a Victorian Gothic complex of church, school and a gaunt, cold vicarage, my earliest travels from home were by bus to a stop still called Jezreels after the huge, half-finished ruin designed by a Victorian sect to reach towards Heaven. Then school: worshipping every day in the Norman cathedral and being taught in the gracious Georgian confines of Satis House, Kent, overlooked by the powerful walls of Rochester Castle.

Going up to Cambridge, my first public protest was not political, but marching in the Anti-Ugly campaign. We confronted the Master of Emmanuel for allowing his beautifully proportioned 17th-century college, largely designed by Wren, to be disfigured by a vulgar, undistinguished and wholly unsympathetic 1950s extension. His response was typical of the time: ‘We can always grow ivy over it.’

At the Department of the Environment, from 1993 I had responsibility for planning, contemporary building and architecture. We had to face the fact that much of what had been built since the Second World War was simply not up to standard. The issue was not taste, nor was it style, but quality and fitness for purpose. The problem was characterised by a contemporary exhibition of London’s listed post-war buildings. All had won architectural prizes and yet every one of them leaked. What’s more, most were ugly and betrayed the architect’s true vocation to design so that a building is fit for purpose, but also beautiful.

Architecture is the only compulsory art. People can avoid going to concerts, plays or galleries, yet the built environment is forced upon them; how deprived are those brought up amid glass boxes and leaking flat roofs.

> ‘The establishment was furious with the clause. However, once passed, support grew’

The opportunity for change came with the need for a new Planning Act. We had to be careful not to trespass into questions of taste, but were determined to be tough on design quality. We brought back the word ‘beauty’. My architectural adviser, Liam O’Connor, fresh from helping the then Prince of Wales, was an enthusiast for the classical. Pugin was my hero, so we played well opposite each other. It was to him that I proposed the ‘Gummer Clause’.

It had its roots in my constituency in Suffolk. I knew of so many great houses that had been demolished after 1945 when death duties and the shortage of materials had conspired to make destruction attractive. Each retained its parkland; each ached for a new centre. I realised that none could have one and the English tradition of the country house could not continue unless we changed the attitudes bred by the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, which had no place for such an elitist concern.

The establishment was furious when the new clause was unveiled. Civil servants had advised against its inclusion, architects saw it as resistance to much of what they had built and the Opposition condemned it as elitist and reactionary. Only the firm backing of my colleagues meant we could hold the line. However, once passed, support began to grow and architects saw the opportunity it presented. The change was so complete that, when John Prescott tried to rescind the clause, the RIBA had altered its stance and ensured it was retained, albeit with face-saving conditions.

My only regret is that so many of the houses built have been mere reworkings of the Georgian style. Little that is really new, although a few, such as Sara Low’s The Wilderness in Suffolk, show what could be done. However, the opportunity is now there. The great tradition can continue: new country houses, fit for purpose and beautiful. We made a difference.

John Gummer, now Lord Deben, was the Conservative MP and Environment Secretary who initiated ‘Gummer’s Law’—or paragraph 3.21 of Planning Policy Guidance Note 7 (PPG7), in 1997. It allows the building of a new country house in open countryside, provided it is of ‘truly outstanding’ design and ‘would significantly enhance’ its setting

Will Pryce/Country Life Picture Library

Restoring country houses and estates

ADAM ARCHITECTURE

adamarchitecture.com

RENAISSANCE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE 1975-2025

Radbourne Hall, Derbyshire

Photograph by Paul Highnam

IN 2014, following the death of her mother at the age of 102, Lady Chichester inherited this fine 1740s Palladian house. She descends from the Chandos-Pole family, which can trace its connections with the estate back to the Middle Ages. At the time of her inheritance, the fabric of the building was visibly failing and the hall ceiling was sagging as the result of the movement of a structural steel inserted during the course of 20th-century repairs.

In 2017–20, under the direction of Peregrine Bryant Architects, the whole building underwent a far-reaching renovation (*'A most welcome return', March 9, 2022*). The roof was renewed, fire partitions and insulation inserted and the services throughout replaced. As well as respecting the most important interiors—which include a fine saloon with paintings by Joseph Wright of Derby commissioned in 1771–72—the work has sought to make the house liveable as a modern home. To this end, a kitchen in a contemporary idiom has been created in the former dining room and a new external staircase added to the back of the building. This creates a balcony off the saloon and also directly connects the first-floor rooms with the garden.

One of the planning conditions of the stair was that its structure should not touch the historic fabric. It is, therefore, cantilevered to leave a tiny gap between the old and new work.

The restoration by Sir James and Lady Chichester has also involved the careful repair and renewal of the interior decoration in the bedrooms that were created in the 1950s by the designer John Fowler. This exemplary project has won several awards, from the Georgian Group, Historic Houses and the Derbyshire Historic Buildings Trust. *JG*

RENAISSANCE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE
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A question of technique

Craft-makers stand equal with architects and patrons in the trinity of the country-house creator. **Mary Miers** meets five experts keeping our historic houses and their collections alive, repairing, conserving, reinstating and adding new layers of creativity

Photographs by Simon Buck, Millie Pilkington and Joe Bailey

Pargetter

WE'RE among the last of the traditional pargetters,' says Bill Sargent, whose grandfather, father, uncles, brothers and cousins were all in the trade. Hailing from Essex, he cut his teeth apprenticed in London, before transferring to Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk to work with his grandfather and 'two old boys', learning decorative freehand plasterwork. 'I was 21, they were in their seventies. They'd trained in the Arts-and-Crafts tradition and I was greatly influenced by that.'

Since setting up on his own in 1971, Mr Sargent has worked on every major pargetting job in East Anglia, as well as in manor houses and cottages across the country. Using only traditional materials, he does everything from restoring plaster walls and decorative modelling to new Jacobean-style overmantels and ceilings. He's proud to be keeping alive a tradition developed as a more affordable alternative to the finer gypsum plasterwork perfected by *stuccadori*. Modelled freehand in situ with a mix of sand, lime and ox-hair, pargetting is coarser textured, weatherproof and rustic. 'It's really a cottage industry, although it also decorated farm and manor houses,' says Mr Sargent, who looks to folk art and medieval paintings for inspiration. 'It's meant to be quite naïve; I draw the motifs on with a little trowel, model them freehand and then, after brushing out (to reduce sharpness), limewash them when dry.' The pargetter also carries out stamp-work and employs other techniques, such as sgraffito.

A rare survival from pargetting's Jacobean heyday adorns the façade of a Maidstone →

Left: **Master of his art: Suffolk-based Bill Sargent.** *Above:* **A detail of his painstaking pargetting on a 17th-century house in Kent**

merchant's house of 1611. The upper tiers had succumbed to cement, but the principal storey's spirited floral scrollwork and royal heraldry survived, albeit crumbling and daubed with coloured acrylics when Mr Sargent was called to the rescue. 'We couldn't get the paint off, so, after remodelling lost detail, we applied a white limewash and gold leaf (there was evidence for both) and repainted using traditionally mixed pigments. It's rare for pargetting to be painted, but we researched the colours and produced an appropriate scheme.'

Mr Sargent is committed to passing his skills on to a new generation and notes with interest that most who come to work with him these days are women.

The Pargetting Company (07748 880823; www.pargettingcompany.com)

Conservation joiner and wood carver; 3D digital specialist

CARVER and historic-timber consultant Matt Bateman and digital specialist Greg Meeson are at the cutting edge of restoration. Based at Saffron Walden in Essex, they began the conversations that led to their professional collaboration in the pub and have gone on to develop an innovative use of digital technology that has contributed to the reinstatement of such important interiors as the state dining room at Stowe in Buckinghamshire, now restored to its 1740s heyday. Using scanning, 3D modelling and CNC (computer numerical control) cutting to cut the laborious bits before the refined hand-carving, they have replicated the room's Flitcroft gilded, full-height chimneypieces and overmantels, which were sold in 1922 and are now at Benham Park, Berkshire.

'We're delighted to have worked with them on this ambitious project,' says Anna McEvoy, co-director of the Stowe House Preservation Trust. 'Their passion and eye for detail have enabled us to re-create two magnificent 18th-century chimneypieces using digital technology in a way that supports, rather than replaces, heritage craftmanship.'

With that project delivered on budget in 2023, the trust then commissioned the pair to explore the re-creation of two floral baskets that had been lost from the overmantels, for which it is now fundraising. Key to Mr Meeson's detective work was a set of glass negatives of 1905 in the archives of Country Life. Having researched the photographer's

Courtesy of Bill Sargent

Greg Meeson and Matt Bateman (*left*) of Refinery blend computer wizardry (*above*) with traditional skills (*below*) to re-create lost decorative features more quickly and efficiently

equipment, he used 3D modelling software to make a digital copy of the camera and its position in the room. He then used this to take 3D data from the glass-plate images and build up a highly accurate digital model of each basket. Surviving Flitcroft examples were then scanned and matched, with Mr Bateman sketching away to resolve the sense of weight and structural integrity. 'The carvers really understood the way petals droop, that slight slumping forward.'

The beauty of the new technology is that it can produce restoration work digitally for inspection, preventing costly changes and making projects less susceptible to delays and going over budget. 'We have seen too many important projects mothballed or even shelved owing to prohibitive time and costs,' Mr Meeson points out. 'We're making carving viable again—and this can also be applied to other specialist crafts'.
(07817 144152; www.refinerystudio.co.uk)

Stonemason

IT'S the fun of figuring out how to do it,' says Scott Lewis, whose 'fascination for how things are put together' underpins his skills as one of the West Country's most enterprising and versatile stonemasons.

Based near Weymouth in Dorset, he does everything from taking the block from the quarry to cutting, laying, setting out, carving and installation. The National Trust and the Landmark Trust are among his clients and, since 2002, he's played a major role in helping Nigel Wiggins breathe new life into his beautiful Devon manor house, Holcombe Court.

'It started with a floor-laying job and it went from there,' says Mr Lewis, who has repaired the Tudor mullions and garden kerbstones, reinstated castellations, carved new windows and archways and hand-dressed and set out the stonework for the conservatory. 'It's never-ending; we work our way around. I'm currently building a staircase and the next big phase is to repair the huge front windows.'

'My privilege is to be able to give skilled artists, artisans and tradespeople some of the best work they will ever have,' adds Mr Wiggins. 'Most of them relish this challenge and our joint endeavour is to make Holcombe Court beautiful and to maintain it to the highest standards.' →

RENAISSANCE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE
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Mr Lewis credits this enlightened approach of 'allowing people to indulge their passions' with inspiring his masterpiece. Chatting with the architect Martin Johnson at a Christmas party, he suggested roofing the new summer-house with a fan-vault. 'Martin's eyes lit up, so we collared Nigel and took him to see several local examples and he said "let's do it".' The result, modelled on the vault at Cullompton church in Devon, is a triumph.

Mr Lewis made the templates for the geometrical jigsaw of 53 stone blocks and cut them all by hand. 'How he managed to turn the complex drawings into three dimensions, self-supporting and delicately detailed, was quite astonishing,' says Mr Wiggins. Nothing like it has been newly built since the restoration of St Stephen's Cloister in London's Palace of Westminster in the early 1950s.

Scott Lewis (lewisstoneworks@gmail.com)

> 'He made the templates for the geometrical jigsaw of 53 stone blocks and cut them all by hand'

Historic-paint consultant

PATRICK BATY uses a dental drill and sharp blade to extract the tiny plugs from plaster and panelling that are key to his detective work piecing together decorative histories. He favours areas likely to have escaped the duster, because layers of dirt delineate paint strata when magnified.

The tedious work begins in his kitchen, tweezering samples into resin-filled moulds to form capsules resembling Foxes Glacier Mints. Each one is then bisected and polished until crystal clear. Next comes the rather medical stage—examining under the microscope, taking photomicrographs, looking for components that react to ultraviolet light, recording it all meticulously. The fun part involves relating the technical data to the documentary research, social history, old photographs and datelines of primers and pigments.

'I like problem solving,' says the former army officer, who took over his father's shop, Papers and Paints, in the 1980s and taught himself the history and science of paint and colours. Now an international consultant, he's worked or advised on almost every major British historic building. In 2021, he was invited to Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire →

Game of stones: for stonemason Scott Lewis, it's all about the fun of the process, working out how each piece fits together

to establish whether the dramatic treatment of the White Room could be attributed to Morris and Rossetti, who moved here in 1871. Having identified the first white scheme as the 13th of 20 layers painted onto the 1750s panelling, Mr Baty pieced together other clues and information and the date fitted. He was able to indicate the exact shade and, finally, to mix the paint.

The curator Kathy Haslam also asked him to examine the overmantel that Webb made for the Green Room in 1883. Mr Baty duly proved how an exposed patch was the original Brunswick Green and recorded the colour with a spectrophotometer. He then downloaded the reading and matched it in paint. Further investigation found the same green in the Old Hall. 'What's fascinating is that the hangings in both rooms are designs of 1883,' reveals Dr Haslam. 'We now have a sense of a holistic redecoration, which we could never have ascertained without the paint analysis'.

As Mr Baty notes: 'It's a massive jigsaw puzzle. The joy is being allowed to take samples from around the house, because then you can start finding commonalities. I'm interested not so much in whether the paint is pink or green, but in the story that emerges.' *Papers and Paints (020–7352 8626; www.papersandpaints.co.uk)*

> 'I'm interested not so much in whether the paint is pink or green, but in the story that emerges'

Textile conservator

SOPHIE YOUNGER'S 'Floors Castle Tapestry Conservation Report' for the Duke of Roxburghe's seat in the Scottish Borders is admirably direct: 'Reduce amount of visible light *now*' she implores for each item, providing advice on light-reducing options in an appendix. 'Overall Condition' judges Garden Tapestry to be 'crudely restored' and a 17th-century Brussels Verdure 'unstable, silk is fragile—fractured and broken in places. Open slits. General ingrained dirt'. Thankfully, however, the condition of the Floors tapestries is mostly 'good' or 'very good' and the report is pitched at preventative and remedial conservation rather than urgent repair.

A graduate of the Royal School of Needlework, with degrees in tapestry weaving and art history, Mrs Younger learned textile conservation techniques at the Burrell Collection in Glasgow, before setting up her own studio. For more than three decades, she has worked on textiles in settings from Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh to National Trust for Scotland properties and private houses. Her consummate needlecraft, coupled with scientific and technical knowledge—an all-too-rare combination today—make her ideally qualified to assess one of the finest private textile collections in Scotland.

A ducal rescue: Sophie Younger cleaned the original velvet, dyed silk organza and stitched rosettes for this William and Mary chair at Floors Castle in the Borders

'Honestly, they're to die for,' she exclaims of the Floors tapestries, adding that, when surveying those in the ballroom, she noticed 'this incredible set of William and Mary ebonised armchairs with their original upholstery. They were in poor-to-terrible condition and my jaw dropped when I realised that one cover had been machine-stitched onto a new backing. *Nothing* so old and beautiful should ever go near a sewing machine.'

Permitted to take one chair back to her Perth studio, she set out to demonstrate how its precious soprarizzo velvet cover could be repaired without removal. Her assistant Fiona Watt swabbed out water stains, removed crude repair stitches and humidified the fabric to relax and realign broken threads. Then they dyed and attached a silk organza to replace the lost pale-green backing and cut around the pattern to reveal the two-toned blue velvet pile. Much time was spent refining the shade for the organza and protective net overlay, intricately stitching, infilling the decayed gold braid and reforming its rosettes with matching silk ribbon. 'That's why conservation is expensive; you spend hours fiddling about,' says Mrs Younger, who has now been commissioned to repair more of the set.

'We're committed to the conservation of all the historic artwork, furniture and tapestries in the castle,' says the Duke of Roxburghe. 'Sophie came highly recommended and has done an exquisite job restoring some of the most important chairs in the collection.' *Younger Conservation (01738 440744; www.youngerconservation.com)*

Paint conservator Patrick Baty deduced and re-mixed this exact shade of white for Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire

RENAISSANCE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE 1975 - 2025

Chillingham Castle, Northumberland

Photograph by Paul Highnam

ON January 27, 1344, a certain Thomas of Heton sought a licence from Edward III to 'fortify and battlement his manor of Chevelyngham with stone and lime and to make the same a castle or fortalice to be held by him and his heirs without impediment'. Remarkably, the original copy of this royal licence is kept at Chillingham Castle today.

The property subsequently passed into the possession of the Grey family, who regularised the building as a quadrangle in the early 17th century. The castle then came into the hands of the Earls of Tankerville by marriage in 1695, who developed it further.

From 1933, following the death of the 7th Earl of Tankerville and the sale of its contents, Chillingham was left empty for nearly half a century. The fabric began to deteriorate and, following a failed attempt to pass it to the National Trust, the castle seemed set to fall into ruin. In 1981, however, Sir Humphry Wakefield and his wife, the Hon Lady Wakefield, a descendant of the Grey family, came to its rescue. They have thrown themselves into the task of restoring the building and, against the odds, successfully repaired the fabric.

With a shared interest in collecting and the Arts, they have also turned Chillingham into a castle of imagination and beauty, every room filled with eye-catching objects (*'A castle of curiosities', February 7, 2024*). It is an extraordinary achievement to have taken on this huge task and driven it forward with such determination. Shown here is a view of the castle across the Italianate walled garden laid out in the 19th century. *JG*

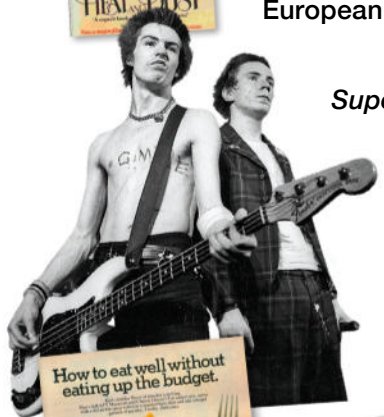
www.chillingham-castle.com

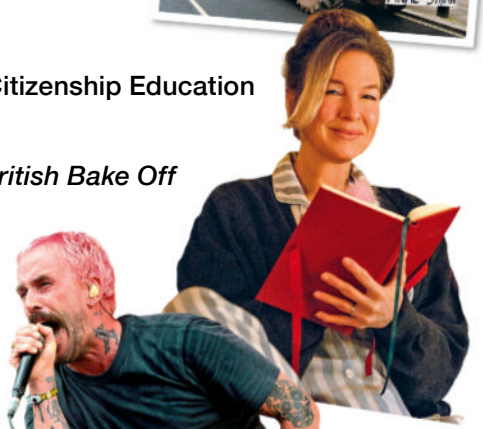
1975 and now

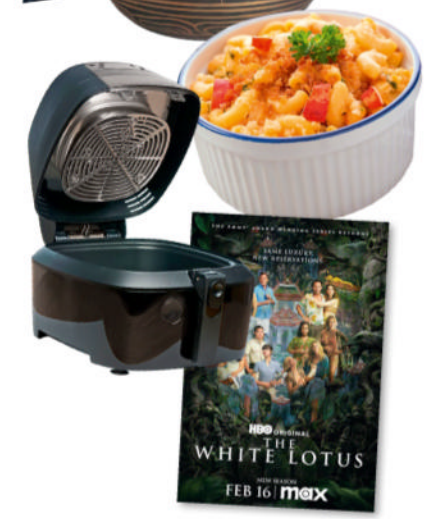
Over the past 50 years, in the aftermath of the 'Destruction of the Country House' exhibition, many (although not all) aspects of life have changed out of all recognition

RENAISSANCE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE 1975-2025

1975	2025
Elizabeth II	Charles III
Harold Wilson	Sir Keir Starmer
Margaret Thatcher	Kemi Badenoch
Vietnam war ends	Gaza/Ukraine negotiations
Microsoft is launched	DeepSeek AI
Laser printing	Going paper-free
National Front against Europe	Farmers against inheritance tax
National Railway Museum	Nationalisation of the railways
Vauxhall Cavalier	Nissan Qashqai
White-tailed sea-eagle reintroduction	Beaver bombing
SAVE Britain's Heritage	Build, baby, build
European Architectural Heritage Year	European Year of Digital Citizenship Education
Heat and Dust	*Bridget Jones IV*
Superwoman by Shirley Conran	Prue Leith on *The Great British Bake Off*
Germaine Greer	Sally Rooney
Bellbottoms	Barrel-leg
Hot pants	Cycling shorts
Jumpsuits	Jumpsuits
Laura Ashley	Molly Mahon
The Farrah Fawcett flick	The bob
The Sex Pistols	Idles
Inspector Morse	*Slow Horses*
Tequila Sunrise	Safe Sex on the Beach
Black Velvet	Guinness 0.0
Quiche lorraine	Bao bun
Fondue party	Gong bath
Macaroni cheese	Lobster macaroni cheese
Chicken brick	Air fryer
Shagpile carpet	Seagrass matting
Rubber plant in plastic pot	Bay tree in hessian bag
Patio garden	Wild garden
LSD	Mushroom chocolate
Fawlty Towers	*The White Lotus*
Bohemian Rhapsody	*Bohemian Rhapsody*







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RENAISSANCE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE
1975-2025

Asleep no more

Fifty years ago, there were very few garden designers. Now, horticulture is a major industry, thanks to the extraordinary revival of the country-house garden, finds **Tiffany Daneff**

WHEN George Harrison bought the 30-acre estate of Friar Park in Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, in 1970, he found the famous historic gardens in an almighty mess: glasshouses were glassless, the grand lakes silted up and full of rubbish and the famous topiary garden had knitted together, forming an impenetrable thicket. The demise of Sir Frank Crisp's masterwork—created in the late 1890s and once cared for by 45 gardeners—was emblematic of the entropy that had set in following the two World Wars: all over the country, gardens suffered.

> 'People who had never had a big garden didn't know what to do with it. The garden designer was born'

There was no longer the money to pay for the gardeners and, in so many cases, the men had been lost on the battlefield or had left for better-paid work in the factories. Formerly productive kitchen gardens lay idle or were given over to act as glorified stock pens; flowerbeds and tennis courts had been dug up for victory and dock, nettles and elder had wormed their way through the roots of every once-loved peony and rose.

Over the past 50 years, however, the gardens at Friar Park, as have those of so many other country houses—far too many to even →

Poppies and cornflowers in the annual meadow at East Cliff on the Isle of Wight, designed by Arabella Lennox-Boyd

hazard a guess at the numbers—have been rescued from their thorny slumbers. After Harrison's death, his widow, Olivia, put all her energies into continuing his work to bring the gardens back to life. She sought out photographs and documents—including from the COUNTRY LIFE archives—that shed light on the garden's former glories, she visited specialist nurseries, consulted experts and employed the gardeners necessary. Still the work continues, partly because this is a very large space, partly because the work in gardens is never done.

Much changed in that decade: only five years later, Sir Elton John bought Woodside, a house with 37 acres in Old Windsor, just outside Windsor Great Park in Berkshire, and asked Rosemary Verey to help with the gardens. In paintings by Thomas Robins the Elder, the gardens appeared as Rococo with a Chinese kiosk, inspired by the pagoda at Kew. Later, Sir Roy Strong remade Verey's Woodside White Garden into an Italian Garden.

> 'As confidence in gardens grew, many owners commissioned a masterplan for 10, 20, 30 years in the future'

It was the noisy arrival of the 1980s, flush with new money and renewed confidence, that really kick-started the renaissance of the country-house garden. The purchase of Highgrove in Gloucestershire by the then Prince of Wales, now The King, in 1980 and his evident enthusiasm for plants and gardening confirmed the royal imprimatur. Dame Miriam Rothschild advised on the planting of a wildflower meadow at Highgrove where there had been little garden at all. Lady Mollie Salisbury, who, from the 1970s, had been working her magic on the garden at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, helped the Prince create the Sundial Garden and Verey made the Cottage Garden. When the designers Julian and Isabel Bannerman were asked to make a stumpery there, they recalled how ahead of its time the garden was on their first visit in 1992 in being cared for organically—something that's now more usual than not.

Up until then, there had been only a handful of garden designers, notably Percy Cane, Russell Page and Lanning Roper. There were the grand lady gardeners, too, who still remembered how to create the big Edwardian borders tumbling with roses and filled with the scent of catmint and lavender. Verey and Penelope Hobhouse would often be invited to lunch and asked for their opinions on a garden, but Arabella Lennox-Boyd was probably the first of the modern landscape designers. She became interested in gardens after seeing wonderful country-house bounds with terrific views and masses of hybrid musk roses and *Pyrus salicifolia*.

'Nancy Lancaster and Geoffrey Jellicoe had made a wonderful garden at Haseley Court in Oxfordshire full of tumbling roses,' says Lady Lennox-Boyd, who recalls that, in the mid 1980s, she had to move her office out of its tiny basement with one secretary and take on more people to cope with the amount of work that was coming in.

'Arabella used to ask clients how long they planned to live in the house,' says Rosie Atkins, who had been the editor of *Gardens Illustrated* at its launch in 1993, when the magazine tapped into the new horticultural mood. 'People didn't do that back then. The

The restored 18th-century landscape is brilliantly combined with contemporary additions at Belcombe Court in Wiltshire

owner simply commissioned the designer, much as you'd commission an artist.'

Before then, points out the designer James Alexander-Sinclair, vice-president of the RHS, you inherited your country house. 'That all changed in the 1980s and people who had never had a big garden didn't know what to do with it. That is where the garden designer was born. Nowadays, you can barely throw a heavy brick without it hitting a garden designer.'

Money was always the deciding factor on what could be achieved. The garden designer Mary Keen, who sat on the National Trust's Gardens Panel in the 1980s and 1990s, recalls worries over kitchen gardens. 'We were perpetually laying them partly to orchard, partly to wildflower meadow.' In her book *Paradise and Plenty* (2015), she describes the antithesis to this: the restoration she oversaw of the Rothschilds' walled garden at Eythrope in Buckinghamshire, where there were the gardeners to ensure that every square foot of space was properly cared for.

To mention only a very few ways in which private walled gardens have been adapted to 20th- and 21st-century lives and budgets: →

at Hopetoun, near Edinburgh, Lady Hopetoun filled the four walls with mounding perennials that make it look like a painting; for clients near Culham in Berkshire, Dan Pearson dug out a cup-shaped depression in the ground for star-gazing and created a viewing mound from the spoil; at Broughton Grange, Oxfordshire, Tom Stuart-Smith designed a jewel box of plantings around formal water; and at Easton Walled Gardens, near Grantham in Lincolnshire, Ursula Cholmeley transformed the limestone-walled Tudor enclosure into a meadow in which roses are trained over iron supports made by a local blacksmith.

Lady Cholmeley chairs the gardens committee of Historic Houses, which launched its annual awards to gardens more than 40 years ago. Sponsored by Christie's, the awards 'recognise the importance of gardens to the public'. The winner in 2021 was the huge (almost eight acres) walled garden at Gordon Castle in Moray. This had been ingeniously redesigned for the Gordon Lennoxes by Arne Maynard in a dramatic scheme that divided the garden into four quadrants, subdivided again, and is a great draw with visitors, being visually exciting, floriferous and useful.

Another very different, but equally thrilling project overseen by Mr Maynard is the replanting of the gardens that surround the magnificent medieval Haddon Hall in Derbyshire. He remembers his first visit: 'The house was untouched and there was a magic about the gardens, but the roses were grown in that 1950s and 1960s manner in bare earth and we wanted to put back some of the romance with wildflowers, native orchids and softer roses. We looked into all the plants that had been introduced and were available in Tudor and Elizabethan days and pulled together a palette that would work.' Inspired by historic tapestries inside the hall, he included plants that would have been used for dyeing the threads—woad, achilleas and hollyhocks, to mention a few. So far, the team has worked on the Fountain Terrace and Bowling Lawn Terrace and plans are afoot for planting out more terraces this year.

Access to new plants and healthier cultivars has underpinned the horticultural renaissance. As the designer Catherine FitzGerald, who has reinvigorated her garden at Glin Castle, Co Limerick, Ireland, notes: 'When Beth Chatto brought her unusual plants to Chelsea

Replanting has returned romance to the terraced 16th-century gardens by Robert Smythson at Haddon Hall in Derbyshire

[in 1977], these were plants we had not seen.' Again, in the late 1990s, when Northern European gardeners brought their naturalistic grasses here, she explains, 'they completely collided with the English aesthetic, creating a flowering of a new vision of English gardens'.

It is no wonder that many country-house gardens have become commercial enterprises. The Duchess of Northumberland's creation of The Alnwick Garden is an obvious example of the appeal to a mass audience. More recently, the garden at Hadspen House, Somerset, once the home of the Hobhouses, has been transformed into The Newt. Other gardens have been rescued as part of the transformation from a private home to a country-house hotel: examples include William Robinson's garden at Gravetye Manor, West Sussex; the Humphry Repton gardens at Endsleigh overlooking the Tamar in Devon, Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons in Oxfordshire and Verey's garden at Barnsley House in Gloucestershire, now part of The Pig hotel chain.

As confidence in gardens grew, many owners commissioned a masterplan that would project works 10, 20 and 30 years into the future. Stoker, the 12th Duke of Devonshire, commissioned a masterplan for the Chatsworth gardens and parkland from Mr Stuart-Smith and work on the Derbyshire estate has been extensive yet gradual, with the restoration and replanting of Joseph Paxton's famous rock garden in 2021 and the subsequent replanting of the woodlands to create a new Arcadia.

At Lowther, near Penrith in Cumbria, Jim Lowther inherited a castle without a roof, historic lawns that had been ruined by tanks manoeuvring over them (not to mention the depredations of a battery chicken farm) and the loss of the rest of the Thomas Mawson garden to stands of conifers. 'Lowther had 30–40 gardeners in its Edwardian heyday,' says designer Mr Pearson, who was invited to draw up a masterplan for how to manage this white elephant. 'Making the masterplan, you go through all the layers of history asking yourself what are the most important layers that you can draw from and include, but to which you can give a modern and practical approach in terms of staffing and funding.' →

RENAISSANCE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE
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Facing page: **The meadow at Highgrove, Gloucestershire, planted by Dame Miriam Rothschild. The King's enthusiasm for wildflower meadows has revived their popularity.** *Above:* **Arne Maynard's redesign of the eight-acre walled garden at Gordon Castle, Moray**

Marianne Majerus Garden Images; Jason Ingram; Highgrove/Photography by Jason Ingram; Historic Houses/Ed Bollom

He adds: 'The question was what could you do within that setting that was convincing, that is telling the story. Using the principles outlined above, we created a garden in the ruins of the castle so that when you are standing in what was the drawing room you can look up and see the fireplaces in what were the bedrooms, where *Clematis* 'Bill MacKenzie' is growing through the windows.' Work continued with a new rose garden and the restoration in the past two years of the original Mawson waterworks. 'The rock garden, Japanese garden and scented garden were overgrown with wild raspberries, dock and ground elder, all of which have been carefully removed.' Rather than replace the Edwardian lead storks and cranes in the Japanese garden, Mr Pearson has used his experience of working in Japan to 'conjure that spirit using the existing framework and replanting with native Japanese woodland perennials'.

At Dunira, a Mawson garden in Perthshire, the new owner called on the designer Simon Johnson to oversee the work. 'When I first saw Dunira, there was hardly anything there, it was like Machu Picchu with bits of masonry poking up here and there. But Mawson's archive in Kendal was very helpful and the COUNTRY LIFE archive is such a wonderful tool with all those amazing photographs.' Dunira is a good example of a significant garden where enough of the original survived for an accurate reconstruction to be possible.

> 'It's getting back to one voice and a strong personality that's specific to that place'

'Stonework and hard surfaces, once restored, don't need much maintaining, Mr Johnson notes. If staffing is limited, when you indulge yourself horticulturally in one part of the garden, you have to restrain yourself in others. Plants have to really earn their place.'

'There can be hundreds of years of layers of different things done over different generations,' points out landscape designer Pip Morrison, who is managing the restoration and reimagining of the Auckland Palace garden and parkland at Bishop Auckland in Co Durham, which have been altered by successive bishops for 900 years. 'You have to analyse everything, past and present, and consider what belongs and what feels out of place. It's thinking about the character of a place and editing out the elements that are cluttering it up to get back to one voice and a strong personality specific to that place.'

This approach ensured the success of his restoration for Tom and Rosamond Sweet-Escott of the formal gardens at Chettle, a fine Baroque house in Dorset. 'The big reflecting pool was completely new, but in the style of the 18th century.' Surrounding it with wildflower meadow instead of lawn was the final touch of genius—because, in the words of Ms FitzGerald: 'We're all wanting a softer approach. People like to walk on a mown path through a wildflower meadow. We crave long grass and woods and bluebells.'

It looks as if whatever other fashions in the garden change, meadows, which were given the royal stamp of approval when The King encouraged the creation of new wildflower meadows to celebrate his mother's Diamond Jubilee—are likely to stay with us—even if they look scruffy for months each year.

RENAISSANCE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE 1975 - 2025

Knowsley Hall, Lancashire

Photograph by Paul Highnam

IN 1997, after it had spent 35 years in institutional use, the Earl and Countess of Derby began to restore Knowsley Hall, which stands only 11 miles from the centre of Liverpool. This ambitious project has variously involved the reversal of the physical effects of office conversion, the repair of the fabric and the representation of the outstanding associated collection (*'A home reborn', October 30, 2024*).

The State Dining Room, shown here, is one of the main rooms that were the initial focus of their attention. This spectacular interior was completed before 1822 by John Foster Jnr of Liverpool, who trained in the office of Sir Jeffry Wyatville, a favourite architect of George IV. The fireplaces and chandelier survive from the original interior, but the room was extensively redecorated in the 1890s and most of its original furniture was sold off in the 1960s. Visible in this photograph are modern copies by Neil Stevenson of the original dining table and chairs that were specially commissioned for the restoration.

The interior has been rehung with an array of dynastic portraits organised in chronological order by Lady Derby, with advice from the late Sir Oliver Millar, a former director of the Royal Collection. New woollen curtains to a late-19th-century pattern have been hung over the windows and the central skylight of the room has been repaired. More recently, the continuing programme of restoration has focused on the bedrooms of the house, starting in 2015 with the Royal Lodgings in the south wing.

The restoration of Knowsley Hall has shown that even the largest country houses can be successfully revived after institutional use. *JG*

Visit www.knowsleyhallvenue.co.uk

RENAISSANCE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE
1975 - 2025

And now for something different

The days of pulling up the drawbridge are long gone. Over the past 50 years, many owners have turned around the fortunes of their country houses with imaginative diversification, becoming major rural employers in the process, as they tell **Kate Green**

Photographs by Mark Williamson

THE question of how best to juggle commercial enterprise and still preserve the magic is nothing new for country-house owners, as the minutes of a meeting held 60 years ago at Chatsworth, Derbyshire, demonstrate. Necessary work on roofing, drainage and Joseph Paxton's greenhouses was estimated to cost up to £10,000 a year (nearly £200,000 now), yet those present agreed that the provision of a café to raise more money from visitors would be a jarring presence and encourage litter.

Chatsworth's then chatelaine, Deborah, Duchess of Devonshire, recorded in her book *Counting My Chickens*: 'The idea was that it was unfair and greedy to expect people to part with more money than the entrance fee (five shillings). It only dawned on me slowly that people actually wanted to take something away to remind them of their visit and that they were hungry and thirsty as well.'

The Duchess was a pioneer of diversification, credited with turning around a sad, →

All life is here: Susannah and Guy Halsey (*centre left*), with representatives of the many ventures, from RDA to rigging, that thrive at Great Gaddesden, Hertfordshire

Farm-shop pioneer: Debo, Duchess of Devonshire, proved the possibilities of public opening at Chatsworth, Derbyshire, from the 1950s

shuttered, debt-ridden post-war Chatsworth. In 1977, against trustee misgivings, she opened a farm shop in a building that once housed a Shire stallion. It sold meat from the estate, then eggs, pâté, cakes, yoghurt and jams. Under the Duchess's imaginative direction, the shop led the way in tasteful yet unmissable branding—it has been seen as a blueprint.

As for many old families, the days of pulling up the drawbridge and merely 'living' in their gracious country house, perhaps keeping the estate going through farming and peppercorn rents, are over. 'Not a chance,' says Roger Tempest, who has transformed his family home, Broughton Hall in North Yorkshire, adding to it an exquisite spa and retreat. He highlights the responsibility such a house has to the neighbourhood and what it can do for local finance and pride.

'With privilege comes responsibility and the custodian is the ultimate protector,' he points out. 'If you give a house to a council, you don't get the same result. It's a complex social tapestry and if only some of the woke could see that it's not all about hierarchy, but that it can be a force for good.' Mr Tempest founded the company Rural Solutions in the 1990s, when diversification in the countryside 'was not so much a thing'. It is, he says, the route through which 'we respect the past—human endeavour, the architecture and the Arts, which we all enjoy—but instead of the house being a relic of the past, it becomes the future'.

Fortunately for owners, public fascination continues unabated post-covid; 'Jane Austen's England' topped *The New York Times*'s list of 50 places Americans should visit in 2025. The cost of entry (generally about the £25–£30 mark, but more at places such as Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire) doesn't seem to be off-putting, probably because the visitor experience is now so much more than a couple of hours staring at family portraits. The numerous music festivals, country fairs and other events held against these gracious backdrops continue to shore up funds; a law passed in 1994 that allowed marriage ceremonies to take place in country houses was a game changer; and many places now maintain a relentless year-round schedule, with Hallowe'en and snowdrop openings, too—earlier this year, Castle Howard in North Yorkshire reported its most successful Christmas.

This is all just as well, as renovation costs soar and political bashing continues, from the Conservatives' dropping of VAT relief on repairs to Labour's recent hikes in National

No fear of tottering: Roger Tempest has not only put Broughton Hall, North Yorkshire, on a secure footing, but helped other estates

Insurance and the removal of agricultural property relief. New legislation designed to protect the public from aggressive digital marketing could have the unfortunate knock-on effect of imposing restrictions on membership and subscription schemes. The organisation Historic Houses (HH), which at its November AGM will present a new diversification award, sponsored by Savills, calculates that its 1,450 or so member properties face a post-pandemic backlog of repairs costing more than £2 billion overall.

'It's a worrying time,' says Ben Cowell, HH director-general and author of *The British Country House Revival*, published last year. 'It's ironic that, 50 years on from the Labour manifesto that threatened extra taxation, we're back with the same threats. [The then Chancellor] Denis Healey didn't pursue his wealth tax in the end—he made it easier to live in your house through a waiver that you had to open it to the public—but these current tax changes do feel like an anti-growth measure I fear will have an impact on our members, no matter how inventive and resourceful.'

Mr Cowell previously worked for the National Trust and as a civil servant. 'The big revelation for me at the HH was this exciting world of entrepreneurism, so much more dynamic than in the charitable or state sectors. You get such a different feel with independently owned places. The owner of a house can take more risks. Yes, the buck stops with you if it fails, but it does give you more freedom.'

> 'With privilege comes responsibility and the custodian is the ultimate protector'

Great Gaddesden, Hertfordshire

In past centuries, the Great Gaddesden estate in Hertfordshire, which celebrates its 505th anniversary this year, was kept afloat by traditional farming; today, the early-18th-century house at its heart, The Golden Parsonage, is a major contributor, a romantic backdrop to outdoor weddings, filming and events. 'A pretty wildflower meadow, floodlit house and teepees—that's the vibe we offer,' says Guy Halsey, who, in 2013, moved back home from London with his bride, Susannah, to run the estate with his father, Nicholas.

There are several rental properties on the estate—farmhouses, Tudor cottages, flats—and, in the 1990s, Mr Halsey's parents began converting redundant Victorian model farm-type buildings into business units. Some 20 companies are now based here, including security-dog handlers, scaffolders, artists, management consultants and The Stampede Stunt Company, which provides animals for filming. There are livery stables and local riders can buy estate-ride passes; the eight-mile route includes farm and woodland tracks, the Great Lime Avenue, a five-furlong gallop and 28 jumps. 'It's brought the whole place to life and, although it's no longer a farming community, it is a vibrant community, a nice place to work,' says Mr Halsey, whose family has occupied this part of the county since the 14th century.

He previously worked for Savills and was a social-housing consultant, writing financial models—'about the only transferable skill'. Now, he is a full-time farmer in the process of converting to organic. 'With that comes the opportunity to sell directly to farm shops and so on,' explains Mr Halsey. 'We are in the early stages, but it's the direction of travel.' Half of the estate's 1,900 acres is arable, the rest is grassland, occupied by other people's livestock and a Thoroughbred stud, as well as woodland. Great Gaddesden is part of the North Chilterns Farmer Cluster, a GWCT conservation initiative, and a major hedgerow-planting exercise is under way. →

Alamy: James Hardisty

Ready for a close-up

The power of the big screen has played a big part in firing visitors' imaginations. Badminton House in Gloucestershire, seat of the Dukes of Beaufort, is rarely open to the public, although millions are familiar with its exterior from the well-attended Horse Trials. Now, however, there are tantalising peeks at its family treasures—the Canalettos and Woottons, the Georgian furniture and wallpaper—through the camera lens; the house has been the setting for Netflix series *The Gentlemen* (*below*) and *Bridgerton* and for *Vogue* shoots.

Highclere Castle in north Hampshire already had the Egyptian treasures discovered in Tutankhamun's tomb by the 5th Earl of Carnarvon in 1922, but then, in 2010, came the hit television series *Downton Abbey*; it's hard not to hear the theme tune or expect the all-seeing butler Mr Carson (*above*) to open the door as you approach the proud-standing house.

The recent BBC drama *Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light* featured, among other places, Haddon Hall, Derbyshire; Berkeley Castle, Gloucestershire; Barrington Court, Somerset; and Chastleton House, Oxfordshire. Chavenage House, Gloucestershire, home of the Lowsley-Williams family, was recently seen in the Disney+ series *Rivals*, as the O'Hara family home. The Fuller family's Neston Park, Wiltshire, doubled up as television mogul Tony Baddingham's house in the same series and the McTaggarts' Ardross Castle, near Inverness, is the compelling setting for *The Traitors*.

Drayton House, Northamptonshire, home of the Stopford Sackvilles, was the glorious setting for Emerald Fennell's lavish 2023 film *Saltburn*; in Derbyshire, Chatsworth's many credits include *Pride and Prejudice* and *Peaky Blinders*; scenes from *Gentleman Jack* and *All Creatures Great and Small* were filmed at Broughton Hall, North Yorkshire. Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, home of the Cecil family, has been in numerous films since a *Tarzan* epic in 1984, most recently *Bridgerton*, *Enola Holmes*, *Rebecca* and *The Favourite.*

'Ultimately, I want to make it the best it can be without Disneyfying it, but we have to be pragmatic. The farm is the relatively poor relation on the estate—the days of the jolly farmer riding around the neighbourhood on horseback are over—but we're lucky that demand for the things we can offer here is high and we're in a good part of the country, within a National Landscape [the Chilterns] sandwiched between busier places [Hemel Hempstead, Luton]. Our aim is to enhance the place without being stuck in aspic.'
Great Gaddesden, Hertfordshire (01442 252421; www.gaddesdenestate.co.uk)

> 'Diversification spirals upwards—it benefits the church, the schools, the pubs, the whole locality'

Broughton Sanctuary, North Yorkshire

BROUGHTON HALL in North Yorkshire, home of the Tempest family since 1097 and the model for Annie Tempest's famed Tottering-by-Gently cartoon strip, is pretty much unrecognisable from her childhood, when anti-freeze was poured down the loo during one arctic winter. 'My sister's cartoon of throwing another dog on the bed is pretty accurate,' says Mr Tempest, the 32nd custodian. 'Wearing three jumpers and an overcoat inside wasn't unknown and we have a picture of the billiard table covered in snow.'

Now renamed Broughton Sanctuary, the estate has been exquisitely renovated, with 19 holiday homes, renewable energy and a state-of-the-art wellbeing centre offering activities such as moon bathing, cold-water immersion and mountain biking—it is the UK's only Accredited Healing Hotel. Mr Tempest lives in a small house on the estate and the 17-bedroom main dwelling can be rented out for parties, weddings, corporate events and retreats. The surrounding 3,000-acre landscape is tenant farmed and part rewilded—beavers were due to arrive this spring.

'What I've experienced is a radical change: the destruction of geography as IT has redefined what a place in the countryside can do, how it is integral to the social fabric and how this extraordinary architecture is relevant to the modern age. Broughton is all about that,' says Mr Tempest, now in his sixties. 'The politics of envy of the 1970s was a deep wound [to country houses], but when Margaret Thatcher gave us a bit more freedom, it changed from selling everything to a sense of purpose and the renaissance began. In 1974, Broughton

Weddings—with the Nero String Quartet and pizza (*right*)—are doubly joyful at Iscoyd Park, Flintshire, pleasing the newlyweds and preserving the house for Phil and Susie Godsal

Where the money comes from

Historic Houses surveyed members this spring about their economic activities

84% open to day visitors

62% have residential lettings

69% have been used as a film set or photographic backdrop

60% have a café or restaurant

60% host festivals or other public events

58% host weddings

45% operate commercial lettings

48% host corporate events or conferences

38% offer holiday accommodation

46% host concerts and theatre

38% run workshops and courses

33% incorporate an art gallery or run exhibitions

**Figures taken from a sample of 355 owners. Membership of HH is £68pa (01462 896688; www.historichouses.org)*

employed one person; now, it's 55, plus many contractors and self-employed workers.'

He continues: 'Diversification spirals upward—it benefits the church, the schools, the pubs, the whole locality. There's nothing left [financially] at the end of the year, but the house fulfils its function and is in beautiful condition. Yes, class and hierarchy lurks in the background, and is still misunderstood, but we have largely shed that now. These places are here to be loved by all.'

Broughton Sanctuary, North Yorkshire (01756 799608; www.broughtonsanctuary.co.uk)

Iscoyd Park, Flintshire

Phil Godsal is the latest in a long line of Philip Godsals to have lived at Iscoyd Park since Philip Lake Godsal, son of the leading coach-builder of his day, bought it in 1843 (the house dates to 1737). In 2009, he returned with his wife, Susie, and tiny children to the beautiful, mellow, Georgian house in Flintshire on the North Wales border. It was a brave move, as Iscoyd's viability was precarious, to say the least, but its tasteful £1 million transformation into an atmospheric wedding venue—completed only minutes before the first bridal party arrived—is inspired and welcoming (Country Life, *October 17, 2012*).

'My father [also a Philip Godsal] sorted out the deathwatch beetle in the roof and the collapsing outbuildings, but we renovated everything else,' he explains. 'It had to be rewired, replumbed, fire-alarmed, the asbestos removed, bathrooms added—and completely remodelled so that it worked for parties. It was a bit of a nightmare, but it was exciting.'

It was also a dramatic career change. 'I hadn't even worked behind a bar,' admits Mr Godsal, previously a contemporary-art dealer in London. 'It was like *Fawlty Towers* at first, just us and a Polish couple, and the four of us were doing everything—cooking breakfast, carrying luggage, dealing with drunk people. It was very challenging. We were living in the attic above the dance floor and I came back at 2am one morning to find Susie in tears with three screaming children.'

Current projects are the restoration of the walled kitchen garden, with home-produced food in mind, and an expansion of the coach-house restaurant, which hosts supper clubs and Sunday lunches, with a dance floor and bar: 'It means we can offer a different wedding package; they don't have to use the house and it will work for smaller parties and late-night bashes. It also offers a nice way for couples to return, for birthdays, christenings and so on.'

The knock-on effect on the local economy is beneficial: the park employs about 55–60 people, several of whom are in their first job. However, Mr Godsal, chairman of the HH in Wales, sees the current economic outlook as uncertain. 'I think hospitality will take a battering and, in Wales, we're braced for a tourist tax. Owners are not only keeping these national treasures going for themselves, but for the wider community; there is a far higher level of access than in past years. Yet if private owners can't keep the roofs on, the houses will either die or have to be kept by councils. It's makes for a difficult environment—but at least people are still getting married!'

Iscoyd Park, Flintshire (01948 780785; www.iscoydpark.com)

Roaring into the Season: the Festival of Speed at Goodwood, West Sussex

What's on at the big house

Here are 40 events being held at country houses this summer, from jousting to Shakespeare, birdwatching to motor-racing and horse trials

May 2–4 BBC *Gardeners' World* Spring Fair, Beaulieu, Hampshire (www.beaulieu.co.uk)

May 2–October 19 'Austen and Turner: A Country House Encounter', Harewood House, West Yorkshire (www.harewood.org)

May 3–5 Spring Fine Food Market, Burghley, Lincolnshire (www.burghley.co.uk)

May 3–5 Hertfordshire Garden Show, Knebworth (www.knebworthhouse.com)

May 4 Bluebell & Wild Garlic Sunday, Pencarrow, Cornwall (www.pencarrow.co.uk)

May 5 Dawn Chorus Birdwatch, Doddington Hall, Lincolnshire (www.doddingtonhall.com)

May 7–11 MARS Badminton Horse Trials, Badminton, Gloucestershire (advance tickets only; www.badminton-horse.co.uk)

May 8 Old Time Sailors concert, Cambo estate, Fife (www.camboestate.com)

May 17–18 Goodwoof, Goodwood, West Sussex (www.goodwood.com)

May 25–26 Living Heritage Game and Country Fair, Burghley, Lincolnshire (www.burghley.co.uk)

May 24–26 The Queen's Joust, Leeds Castle, Kent (www.leeds-castle.com)

June 4–July 6 The Grange Opera Festival, The Grange, Hampshire (www.thegrangefestival.co.uk)

June 5 *Twelfth Night*, Athelhampton House, Dorset (www.athelhampton.com)

June 5 Jazz on the Tea Terrace, Kelmarsh Hall, Northamptonshire (www.kelmarsh.com)

June 8 LEAF Open Farm Sunday, Gaddesden estate, Hertfordshire (www.gaddesdenestate.co.uk)

June 21 Murder Mystery Evening, Picton Castle, Pembrokeshire (www.pictoncastle.co.uk)

Until June 22 'Discovering Jewish Country Houses: Photographs by Hélène Binet', Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire (www.waddesdon.org.uk)

June 7–8 Homes & Gardens Fair, Boughton House, Northamptonshire (www.boughtonhouse.co.uk)

June 21–22 Painting the Walled Garden Oil Painting Workshop, Holkham Hall, Norfolk (www.holkham.co.uk)

July 3 Old Time Sailors, Hedingham Castle, Essex (www.hedinghamcastle.co.uk)

July 4–6 Paradhis Festival, Boconnoc, Cornwall (www.boconnoc.com)

July 4–6 GWCT Scottish Game Fair, Scone Palace, Perthshire (www.scone-palace.co.uk)

July 10–13 Festival of Speed, Goodwood, West Sussex (www.goodwood.com)

July 12 Battle Proms Concert, Burghley, Lincolnshire (www.burghley.co.uk)

July 12 The Leeds Castle Concert, Leeds Castle, Kent (www.leeds-castle.com)

July 12–13 The Flower and Garden Show, Belvoir Castle, Leicestershire (www.belvoircastle.com)

July 17–20 The Wild Gardens Festival, Port Eliot, Cornwall (www.wildgardensfestival.co.uk)

July 20 Cowdray Park Polo Gold Cup final, West Sussex (www.cowdraypolo.co.uk)

July 25–27 The Game Fair, Ragley Hall, Warwickshire (www.thegamefair.org)

August 2 Battle Proms, Highclere Castle, Hampshire (www.highclerecastle.co.uk)

August 3 Tudorly Terrible History, Berkeley Castle, Gloucestershire (www.berkeley-castle.com)

August 7–10 Gone Wild Festival with Bear Grylls, Holkham Hall, Norfolk (www.holkham.co.uk)

August 9–10 Motors By The Moat, Leeds Castle, Kent (www.leeds-castle.com)

August 9–10 Galloway Country Fair, Drumlanrig Castle, Dumfriesshire (www.drumlanrigcastle.co.uk)

August 20 *Romeo and Juliet*, Beaulieu, Hampshire (www.beaulieu.co.uk)

August 21–24 Leeds Festival, Bramham Park, West Yorkshire (www.leedsfestival.com)

August 29–31 Chatsworth Country Fair, Derbyshire (www.chatsworth.org)

September 4–7 Defender Burghley Horse Trials, Lincolnshire (www.burghley-horse.co.uk)

September 12–14 Goodwood Revival, Goodwood, West Sussex (www.goodwood.com)

September 18–21 Agria FEI Eventing European Championships, Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire (www.bpiht.co.uk)

For private country-house tours, visit 'Invitation to View' at www.historichouses.org/tours

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RENAISSANCE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE
1975 - 2025

Stowe, Buckinghamshire

Photograph by Will Pryce

THE spectacular Marble Saloon, designed for Earl Temple in the 1770s and completed for his nephew, the 1st Marquess of Buckingham, is the centrepiece of Stowe, one of the largest Classical country houses ever created. In 1923, following the sale of its contents, Stowe was saved from demolition by becoming a school. In 1989, its park was taken over by the National Trust and, in 1990, the Stowe House Fund was launched.

When it became apparent that the school could not undertake the gargantuan task of restoring the building within its charitable remit, the Stowe House Preservation Trust (SHPT) was formed in 1997. Its stated purpose is to restore and preserve Stowe for the benefit of the nation and the public. Since then, the SHPT has been involved in the incremental restoration of the interiors at a total cost of £26 million. In the process, it has demonstrated the effectiveness of what was in the 1990s a novel approach to the care of a great historic building. Similar trusts have achieved the restoration of other houses, such as Lytham Hall, Lancashire, and Westonbirt House, Gloucestershire.

Work to the Marble Saloon began in 2003, with generous support from the World Monuments Fund in Britain and the Heritage Lottery Fund. Under the supervision of Purcell Miller Tritton, the coffered ceiling, as well as the bas-relief frieze beneath it, was restored. In 2009, with the help of the trustees of the Stowe School's Hall Bequest (*'A triumphant return', October 21, 2009*), other lost elements of the interior recorded in the 18th century were installed: eight plaster casts of classical gods, goddesses and heroes, as well as reproduction incense burners on tripods, known as *athéniennes. JG*

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Ready for anything

How do you prepare a country house for the challenges of the future? **Arabella Youens** asks the experts

OVER the past 100 years, country houses have faced many threats, not least in the post-Second World War period when many needed remedial work after the depredations inflicted by requisition. Soon, another blow came in the form of death duties, which hit 75%, in some instances 80%, leaving havoc in their wake. Today, the challenges remain, but a combination of new technology, materials, pragmatism and time-honoured craftsmanship is securing their future.

> ‘Conserving the past and meeting modern energy demands appear at odds’

It wasn’t always so, says Bruce Hodgson, founder of furniture- and kitchen-makers Artichoke (www.artichoke.co.uk). The problem, he says, was not only decay, but also the way it was addressed. ‘The challenge is the damage done in less enlightened times—the 1970s comes to mind.’ Philippa Thorp, founder of her design firm Thorp (www.thorp.co.uk), agrees. ‘There wasn’t the money to focus on detailing and shortcuts were taken. Today, there’s a renewed interest in correcting past mistakes and setting houses back on the right foot for the next 100 or so years.’

At the top of the list of challenges facing owners of historic houses is incorporating efficient and cost-effective heating. Britain has some of the oldest housing stock in Europe and it’s also among the draughtiest. A 2020 survey by Tado, a smart thermostat company, found that a UK home with an indoor temperature of 20°C and an outside temperature of 0°C loses, on average, 3°C after five hours, three times more than the average German home.

A country house completely transformed in a root-and-branch project by Thorp Design that entailed both refurbishment and sympathetic extension for guest accommodation

Another challenge today is planning. Most changes must remain imperceptible to the naked eye, yet sufficiently functional to keep the house warm and dry. Conserving the past and meeting modern energy demands appear increasingly at odds. Tim Moulding, the eighth generation of his family to run specialist building firm Moulding (www.mouldingthebuilder.co.uk), believes the answer to this problem lies in a shift in perspective. ‘It’s about managing expectations. Chief among these is being willing to put on a jumper instead

of expecting a near-tropical temperature inside during winter. That makes room for renewable heating systems to be employed.'

Having worked on several projects in recent years, he says that, although there's an appetite for investing in this technology, it comes at a significant cost. 'If you have sufficiently deep pockets and want to create a legacy home, it is the best way forward, but the reality is that most people will live in a house for a few years and then move on, rendering the capital investment unpalatable.'

After the cost, the next challenge is knowing which system to choose. It's been more than 10 years since the Government introduced the UK's Renewable Heat Incentive for domestic use—which closed in 2022—helping owners to install technology such as air-source heat pumps (ASHPs) and ground-source heat pumps (GSHPs), biomass and solar thermal. However, lessons are being learnt. 'It's become clear that biomass is only relevant to those with woodland who can make their own woodchip,' says Mr Moulding. 'The cost of importing these has skyrocketed and that defeats the environmental point.'

Other perceived wisdom is also being challenged; ASHPs were once thought ineffective in coping with large country houses and GSHPs, which involve digging expensive →

boreholes, were once considered the only solution. However, a project at Athelhampton House, a Grade I-listed Tudor manor house in Dorset, has demonstrated that ASHP technology has moved along at pace and now matches GSHP in efficiency. When Giles Keating bought Athelhampton in 2019, the heating bills totalled £55,000 a year. Following energy price rises, these costs rose to £100,000. With the help of architectural firm SPASE Design (www.spase.co.uk), he created a carbon-neutral grid combining the different technologies; in 2023, the energy bill was £500, most of which covered standing charges.

According to Mr Moulding's figures, Athelhampton maintains 18°C in common areas and 21°C in living spaces, even when external temperatures are -4°C. This was achieved despite limitations in insulating certain heritage features, such as the roof of the Great Hall. The investment has not been insignificant: it's taken 15 state-of-the-art ASHP models alongside two solar arrays, 12 storage batteries and four GSHPs. Underfloor heating and breathable insulation materials, such as hemp and wood fibre, were installed at the same time. Much like the rollout of central heating in the mid 20th century, the work required is disruptive. 'It's certainly not for the faint-hearted,' agrees Mr Moulding.

Any intervention to introduce a renewable-energy source must start by improving insulation. Double-glazing windows is challenging from a heritage perspective (although attitudes from some conservation officers and Historic England are changing), so practical solutions include installing draught strips and using shutters where available. These measures are what Mr Moulding refers to as the low-hanging fruit. 'However, there must be a careful compromise between insulation and ventilation when it comes to floor and roof insulation. Condensation can be devastating for a historic house,' he warns. 'Traditional methods are the safest; no one wants to see a return to the days of the 1960s and 1970s when roof tiles were coated in bitumen or cement-based mortars were used instead of lime.'

With new technology, there's a fear of pouring money into something that will soon become obsolete. 'Of course, it's hard to predict what the Betamaxes of tomorrow will be,' says Mrs Thorp, referring to the video cassette recorders that came out in the 1970s only to be quickly eclipsed by VHS. 'For my money, however, it's smart lighting and home-automation systems.' She discourages clients from installing too much technology into their houses. 'Even dimmer switches are unreliable; you can have a beautifully lit house by designing it well in the first place.'

Her advice about tackling any significant house project is to take time to do it once and do it well. 'It's about using quality, time-proven materials and spending time at the drawing board to talk to the experts and capture →

Above: **The drawing room of a Jacobean house that was restored and repaired by Moulding, working with the architectural practice Donald Insall Associates.**
Below: **A country kitchen by Artichoke**

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all the details before the work begins. Too many people are in a hurry and a project often turns into a catalogue of expensive disasters. She employs traditional skilled artisans to make furniture and joinery to achieve a timeless design that will set the house up for the next generation. 'We also don't need to have so much stuff. One of the things we talk about with clients is the idea that every single thing in a room has to have a reason to be there.'

> 'When tackling any significant project, take the time to do it once and do it well'

One of the most notable changes from country houses of the 1920s to the 2020s is evidenced by the role of the kitchen. This has transformed from a functional space rarely entered by owners to the beating heart of the home and a centre of near-constant activity, be it cooking, home-working or socialising. Bunny Turner, co-founder of the interior-design studio Turner Pocock (www.turnerpocock.co.uk), says that this calls for more thoughtful storage solutions, from breakfast larders to house unsightly appliances to back kitchens with a second dishwasher where used plates can be stashed mid dinner party. 'I think we've seen a revival of back-of-house spaces that are being turned into larders and flower rooms, allowing the kitchen to feel less functional in design.'

Mr Hodgson agrees. 'Former sculleries and cold pantries are now put to other uses, such as hobby rooms.' A clever tactic employed by Turner Pocock is to include a six-person table in the drawing room. 'It's always a pity when the best room in the house doesn't see much action,' says Miss Turner. 'A good table here opens up a world of possibilities for board games, another workspace or an extra dining table. I have one at home and it's lovely to have drinks by the crackling fire in the winter and then stay put for supper.'

Many experts prescribe pragmatism in transforming large country houses. Although many welcomed mid-20th-century tastemaker Nancy Lancaster's campaign to have bathrooms adjoining guest bedrooms (instead of sending friends and family down cold corridors clutching towels and sponge bags), there is an argument that bathrooms in country houses have peaked. If there's no obvious space for them, avoid the temptation to put one in every bedroom, says Ms Turner. 'A generous family bathroom is better than a pokey en suite any day.'

Mr Hodgson has similar feelings about air conditioning. 'Open a window, it's Britain. In the hottest months, do as the Europeans do and draw the curtains during the day.'

Above: **A Buckinghamshire house brought to life by Turner Pocock.** *Below:* **The Great Chamber at Tudor manor Athelhampton, Dorset, with a carbon-neutral grid fitted by Moulding and designed by SPASE**

Richard Powers; Jake Eastham; Paul Highnam/Country Life Picture Library

Hooked on classics

John Danzer, expert in the history of garden furniture and an exterior decorator, has spent decades travelling the world finding and refining the best historic garden-furniture designs, as well as the craft skills and materials required to bring them to life. His insatiable appetite for good design has resulted in an international network of friends and colleagues that is as diverse and interesting as the Munder-Skiles collection itself. Here, he explains the breadth and depth of the collection he has created

Above: **The Watson chair:** interpreted from an upholstered original Chippendale chair belonging to a friend, in metal with a slatted teak seat for comfort. £3,300

Above: **The Rain bench:** has its origins in an early municipal bench design from Bermuda. It can be flipped to provide a dry seat following an afternoon downpour, £3,060. Also available as a chair, £1,495

Below: **The Aaron chair:** based on a Belgian design acquired at the great New York Botanical Garden furniture and statuary sale in 2012. The punched metal keeps the chair cool. £3,645

Below: **The Turley chair:** I spotted this in the guest lavatory of a friend, after whom it is named. The scale and delicacy of the design means that it will seamlessly fit with other styles, as well as adding an understated air of chic. £1,530

Above: **The Clifton chair:** this is thought to be a Lutyens-inspired design I first spotted in the 1980s at Clifton Nurseries. Later, I became reacquainted with it thanks to my friend Susan Lyall. £3,725

Above: **The Gunn chair:** this caused a stir thanks to the use of tubular steel rather than heavy, rust-prone wrought iron when it was launched in the 1830s. It can be read as modern or traditional and has spawned a side chair, lounge chair, sofa and tables. £2,975

‘History has taught me that comfort comes mainly from the shape and pitch of the frame, with minimal cushioning needed’

John Danzer

Left: **The Iselin chaise lounge:** inspiration for this came from my Bridgehampton-based friend and philanthropist, Jane Iselin. It has an air of a classic sports car, with teak arms and three positions for optimum comfort. £5,500

For further information, visit The Munder-Skiles Garden at Robertaebasta, No 85, Pimlico Road, London SW1 or www.munder-skiles.com

RENAISSANCE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE 1975-2025

Wimborne St Giles, Dorset

Photograph by Paul Highnam

THE Great Dining Room at Wimborne St Giles was originally created by Henry Flitcroft in the 1750s and restored, together with the house, in the course of a far-reaching renewal of the property by the Earl and Countess of Shaftesbury between 2011 and 2015. Most restoration projects need to be illustrated with before and after photographs, but, in this case, the recent history of the building—its neglect and stylish renovation—is summarised in a single image.

In 1961, the 9th Earl of Shaftesbury died at the age of 91. His grandson and heir made efforts to make the house suitable for modern family living in the 1970s, demolishing parts of the building and making a sale of some of the contents to help pay for the work. The plan faltered, however, and the property fell into disrepair. His younger son then unexpectedly inherited the title in 2005, when he was working as a DJ in New York, US. He and his wife, Dinah, occupied a foothold in the building and began a four-year restoration project. Their work was informed by a desire to preserve a sense of the fragility of the building.

In the case of this room, this has been done by stripping back the damaged fabric and leaving the bare brickwork and structural timbers exposed. The furnishing and hang of paintings aestheticises the effect and turns the interior from a building site into a living room. Note the cord of the chandelier that still hangs down above the table. Philip Hughes, a specialist conservation surveyor, oversaw the work and the principal contractor was Ellis & Co. The restoration project went on to garner several conservation prizes. *JG*

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Penny Churchill

Best-kept secrets

With the arrival of spring, the rural property market in Norfolk has taken off in style, as some of the county's less well-known, but historically significant country houses come to the market

CHARLIE GRAHAM-WOOD of Sowerbys in Norwich (01603 761441) is handling the sale of the pristine Tasburgh Hall estate in south-east Norfolk, an imposing red-brick, neo-Jacobean country house set in 23 acres of landscaped formal gardens, parkland and woodland bounded by the River Tas, eight miles south of Norwich and a mile west of the ancient village of Tasburgh. He quotes a guide price of £3.1 million for the estate, comprising the painstakingly restored, late-19th-century manor house, which is unlisted and offers luxurious accommodation on three floors, including six grand reception rooms, seven bedrooms, a guest and leisure wing, plus outbuildings, a two-bedroom gatehouse and lake.

Tasburgh Hall stands on the site of an earlier, 17th-century house known as Tasburgh Lodge, which, according to *White's Directory of Norfolk 1836*, was the 'pleasant seat' of Gen William Gwyn, a one-legged veteran of the Napoleonic Wars who bought the estate in 1815. Sometime about 1880, the estate was acquired by Edward Johnson, son of John Johnson of St Osyth Priory in Essex. Between 1885 and 1890, Philip Berney Ficklin, scion of a distinguished Norfolk family, replaced the lodge with the present Tasburgh Hall. A serious art collector, philanthropist and a generous host, he extended the house considerably, adding a gatehouse and a ballroom.

During the Second World War, the Hall was taken over by the army and later became a Buddhist centre, before being sold to four families who lived there in separate dwellings. In 2007, Tasburgh Hall was acquired by the current owners, who embarked on a massive 15-year project to bring it back to a single private home of great distinction. During that time, the hall has been renovated down to the smallest detail, with the installation of elaborate plaster mouldings, gilded radiators, oak and stone flooring, luxury designer bathroom fittings and a bespoke Clive Christian-designed kitchen.

Neo-Jacobean Tasburgh Hall is a restored manor house at the heart of a 23-acre estate on the River Tas in Norfolk. £3.1m

The gardens have been enhanced by the planting of specimen trees and topiary, the creation of a stocked lake and the addition of two Hartley Botanic greenhouses and a cart lodge.

Although famously described by Noël Coward as 'very flat', Norfolk does contain areas of higher ground—the valley of the River Tas, which flows through south Norfolk towards Norwich, being one of them. Here, Tom Goodley of Strutt & Parker (01603 617431) is handling the sale of Grade II-listed The Old Rectory in the village of Swardeston, four miles south of Norwich, which stands on high ground overlooking the Tas valley and was the birthplace of Edith Cavell, whose father, the Revd Frederick Cavell, was vicar of the neighbouring church of St Mary the Virgin for 46 years.

The Old Rectory and the church of St Mary the Virgin at Swardeston in Norfolk. £2.2m

Mr Goodley quotes a guide price of £2.2m for the timber-frame former parsonage, which dates from the 16th century and is linked to a fine, double-fronted Georgian extension to provide more than 8,800sq ft of elegant accommodation, including four impressive reception rooms, eight bedrooms, four bathrooms and an open-plan kitchen and sitting room overlooking the rear garden. A single-storey former coach house has been beautifully converted to a 1,500sq ft, two-bedroom annexe, with a former dairy, game larder and courtyard of outbuildings offering further potential to extend.

The Old Rectory stands at the end of a long gravelled drive, surrounded by seven acres of formal gardens and a 1½-acre paddock, the whole bounded by mature hedgerows and woodland. Part of the garden is bordered by a moat, with a passage leading to a 'secret garden' laid mainly to lawn and a pleasant walled garden at the side of the house by the church.

Some 10 miles north-west of Norwich and 2½ miles from the medieval market town of Reepham, Ben Rivett of Savills in Norwich (01603 229229) has overseen the launch—at a guide price of £1.7m—of handsome, Grade II-listed Brandiston Hall, set in eight acres of wonderful gardens and grounds on the edge of Brandiston village. It boasts 17th-century origins with later remodelling in the 19th century and, for Mr Rivett, 'is a house that really fills the eye, with the approach through the trees revealing the striking architectural detail of castellated parapets, mullions and shaped gables, likely influenced by the nearby great houses of Heydon and Blickling'.

> 'Tasburgh Hall has been renovated down to the smallest detail'

For the past 25 years or more, the hall has been the cherished family home of the current vendor, a former director of ITV, who, over the years, has sensitively renovated the house, which provides some 6,000sq ft of easily managed living space on two main floors, including an entrance hall, four reception rooms, a kitchen/breakfast room, utility and boot room, six double bedrooms and four bath/shower rooms; attic rooms above have potential for conversion to further accommodation. Outside, a range of traditional outbuildings includes the original stable block, a studio, garaging and store rooms.

Approached off a quiet country lane through wooden posts framed with wrought-iron park fencing, the gravelled drive meanders through woodland before opening up to a fine view of the house. The maturity of the grounds ensures maximum privacy, with the sunken Victorian water garden one of the highlights. Expanses of lawn surround the house, blending into mixed broadleaf woodland to the south, with paths leading through a private pathway to St Nicholas Church. Formal lawns to the east of the hall are framed with clipped yew and provide a charming view of the house.

Within the grounds are an orchard, a kitchen garden, greenhouse and lawned areas divided by hedging, with obvious locations for a tennis court and swimming pool. →

Above: **Charming Brandiston Hall is set in eight acres of glorious gardens near Reepham, Norfolk. £1.7m.** *Right:* **Loddon Hall at Hales Green in Norfolk. £2.6m**

To the north and west are large paddocks, dotted with some fine, ancient trees that enhance the timeless feel of Brandiston Hall.

Completing our quartet of noteworthy Norfolk houses, all of which offer privacy, space galore, separate accommodation for friends or relatives and proximity to Norwich's excellent schools, is Grade II-listed Loddon Hall at Hales Green, 12 miles south-east of Norwich, a classic late-18th-century country house now in need of updating. Tim Stephens of Humberts in Norwich (01603 661199) quotes a guide price of £2.6m for the south-facing hall, with two good cottages set in 12 acres of gardens and grounds, or £1.95m for the main house and one-bedroom Stable Cottage, with the three-bedroom Hall Cottage available separately at £650,000.

Located halfway between the towns of Beccles and Bungay on the Norfolk/Suffolk border and a mile from the pretty market town of Loddon on the River Chet, Loddon Hall was previously owned by Sir James Cleminson, a former chairman of Reckitt & Colman and president of the CBI, who had a distinguished war record and featured in the film *A Bridge Too Far*. Having served in Africa and Europe, he was one of few to emerge unscathed from Arnhem, where he was among the first wave of parachutists dropped over the Dutch city in September 1944. The present owner of Loddon Hall, who also had an army career before retiring to pursue his business interests, moved in when his late mother moved to Hall Cottage, which stands in half an acre of garden to the west of the hall and was close enough for him to look after her, but private enough to be completely independent, with its own drive and access.

Approached along an avenue of lime trees flanked by two paddocks with an outdoor heated swimming pool to the west of the main house, Loddon Hall comprises five reception rooms, a kitchen/breakfast room and four first-floor bedrooms with three bathrooms. There are a further six rooms on the second floor suitable for conversion to additional accommodation.

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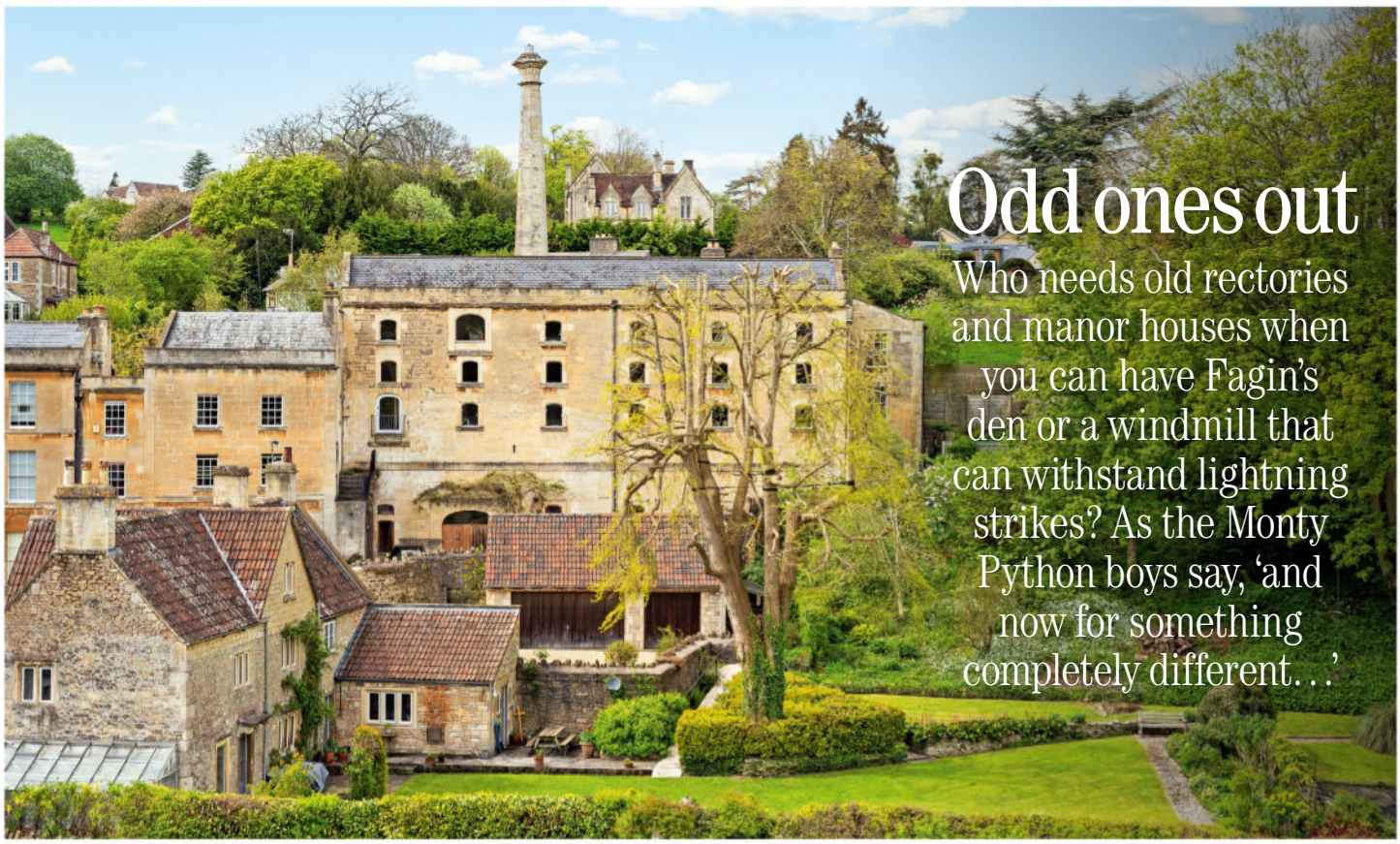

Odd ones out

Who needs old rectories and manor houses when you can have Fagin's den or a windmill that can withstand lightning strikes? As the Monty Python boys say, 'and now for something completely different...'

↑← Somerset, £2.85 million

With its distinctive octagonal chimney, Georgian The Old Brewery is a handsome landmark in Freshford, a sought-after village within the Cotswolds National Landscape about six miles south-east of Bath and three miles from Bradford-on-Avon. An outstandingly stylish conversion, the property boasts a double-height, 70ft-long living room with two rows of south-east facing windows and a galleried walkway, a modern kitchen/breakfast room leading out to a terrace, a double-height library and five bedrooms. Separate accommodation can be found in the two-bedroom Vaults and one-bedroom Brewery Cottage. The garden stretches to a manageable three-quarters of an acre. *Savills (01225 474555)*

→ Lancashire, 'substantial offers invited'

A business rather than residential opportunity, the well-known venue Guys Thatched Hamlet (www.guysthatchedhamlet.co.uk)—across 8½ acres at Bilsborrow on the Lancaster Canal, some seven miles north of Preston on the edge of the Forest of Bowland—has been run by the Wilkinson family for 45 years. It includes Owd Nell's Canalside Tavern, Guy's Eating Establishment and two large function rooms, next to cricket grounds and a bowling green. Within the site is a converted school building, lodges and Oyster Cottages, which comprise a 65-bedroom hotel. Community events hosted there include a weekend-long Oyster Festival every September, as well as sporting fixtures, fairs and ice rinks (to July 20, 2024, the business produced a net turnover of more than £4.75 million). 'Guys Thatched Hamlet has a strong trading history and record with local residents and visitors,' comments agent Julian Troup. 'It's a spectacular location, with lots of amenities within the complex, which could be enhanced or developed further. There's significant demand for hospitality businesses in the region.' *Colliers (0161–831 3324)*

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Properties of the week

← → Warwickshire, £1.75 million

The last remaining windmill in Rowington, this highly unusual landmark was once locally known as 'Bouncing Bess' (presumably because of its 'boat cap', a distinctive windmill feature of the county that allowed the top section of the conical tower to rotate to face the wind). Built by 1789, it has been struck by lightning twice and served as a dormitory for prisoners of war in 1916 before it fell into disrepair. The Mill, as it is now known, is Grade II listed and has been a private residence since 1978; ingenious design features include bespoke kitchen cabinets along a curved wall. There are three reception rooms, four bedrooms, three bathrooms, a detached garage with workshop above, wraparound gardens and an outdoor bar. 'One of the things we've cherished most is the setting,' says the vendor. 'We have total privacy, no close neighbours and uninterrupted views across 1,000 acres of countryside.' *Pittaway Thompson (01926 854458)*

→ ↓ London SE1, £1.85 million

The decor may differ somewhat, but anyone familiar with the 1968 film *Oliver!* will be excited to hear that New Concordia Wharf in Shad Thames was the original setting for Fagin's lair. At the time, when the actor Ron Moody was prancing around singing about picking pockets, the former Victorian grain mill and warehouse, dating to 1882, was derelict. Now converted and much restored, a standout two-bedroom, two-bathroom penthouse has come to the market, covering 1,743sq ft over the fifth and sixth floors, with a large roof terrace overlooking the Thames. Classic warehouse design features include exposed brick and wooden beams, arched windows and a vaulted ceiling. The building, which benefits from a swimming pool, communal roof garden and daytime concierge, is opposite Folly Ditch, the notorious former slum that inspired Dickens. *Anderson Rose (020–3324 0188)*

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Interiors

The designer's room

This set in Albany, Piccadilly, was decorated by Wendy Nicholls of Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler, as a quiet refuge in the heart of the capital

WENDY Nicholls joined the interior-decorating firm Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler in 1976, having previously worked for Mann & Fleming and Charles Hammond. Throughout her career, her mantra has always been to create spaces that reflect the owner's identities. In the case of this set in Albany, the Grade I-listed apartment complex on Piccadilly, London W1, that was converted from a mansion in 1802, the client was 'very much a client who knew exactly what she liked'.

Designed by the French wallpaper manufacturer Dufour, the large-scale panoramic wallpaper was printed from woodblocks with colours finished by hand; it had previously been hung in the client's property in Paris. 'We took it down, brought it to London and set about having it re-hung here,' explains Ms Nicholls. There, she found it was a foot too short to reach the ceiling, which is thought to be more than 10ft high. Undeterred, a team from Colchester Lister was called in to paint in further elements of the sky to complete the picture. 'It's a rare, 19th-century wallpaper that you can't just bung up—it needed careful consideration to figure out how it would make sense in its new home.'

Much of the furniture in the room was made or sourced for the client during earlier projects and given a new lease of life here by adding new cushions with double-edge frills that pull together the underlying colours of tobacco, blue and ochre. The footstool has a length of leopard print 'slung over the top' and a Baltic Chandelier with ormolu arms, blue glass and clear crystals crowns the room. 'It was the look my client wanted: slightly romantic, slightly Swedish and slightly French in nature,' says Ms Nicholls. The curtains are in a fine-striped beige and white linen that is unlined to allow the light to filter through. 'The room is timeless and full of interesting bits and bobs, which is what happens when you spend a lifetime collecting lovely things.'

Arabella Youens

Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler (020–7493 2231; www.sibylcolefax.com)

The drama of the panorama

From bucolic English scenes to Ottoman landscapes, panoramic wallpapers offer a whole world of possibilities, finds **Arabella Youens**

Totty Lowther's Woodland Mural can be customised to include the owner's house (020–7384 2975; www.thefabriccollective.com)

TOTTY LOWTHER has a background in film sets, so it's perhaps not surprising that she was taken with the possibilities of using digital printing to create large-scale, dramatic, panoramic wallpapers. 'A bit of theatre has always been a huge part of my work as a set decorator,' she explains. She works with anything from an 18th-century watercolour to scraps of silk for inspiration. Designs can be scaled up to cover vast expanses and produced in different colours and substrates from grasscloth to *faux* silk.

> 'The possibilities are not only exciting, they are also endless'

Mrs Lowther is developing a new mural featuring the interiors of a Damascene palace in all its faded grandeur, inspired by the photographer Tim Beddow's series of limited-edition prints taken from his book *Damascus: Hidden Treasures of the Old City*. The new design features glimpses of the Bosphorus and other Ottoman landscapes. 'Over the years, I've had a lot of fun re-creating faded country-house atmospheres for holiday cottages on the Castle Howard estate in North Yorkshire and have just completed my sixth house there using my wallpapers and other designs,' she explains. Her Woodland Mural design can be customised to feature the owner's house; so far, she's 'dropped' Castle Howard and Lowther Castle, Cumbria, into the sylvan landscape.

When they first appeared, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, panoramic wallpaper and exotic murals offered a kind of armchair tourism, designed to transport the inhabitants of a room to another time and place. The first panoramic paintings appeared in Paris in the early 1800s and the appeal of grand-scale scenes soon caught the attention of French wallpaper manufacturers, including Zuber and Dufour, which set out to translate the scenic paintings onto panoramic mural wallpapers. The results created a breathtaking experience with all the walls in a room covered with a series of non-repeating scenes. Fast forward to the early 1960s and the Diplomatic Reception Room at the White House in Washington DC, US. It was the first room to be shown to the public after the Kennedys had moved in and undertaken restoration work. A CBS documentary filmed in 1962 follows the First Lady as she describes the panoramic wallpaper she had chosen for the room. Called Vues d'Amérique du Nord, it was designed by Zuber in 1834 and shows scenes of, among other aspects, Niagara Falls and New York Harbour. Mrs Kennedy's project to transform what was then a drab and characterless White House was celebrated by many. Still, it provoked outrage among others after the announcement that it cost about $12,000.

Zardi & Zardi's Frampton Verdure panorama, inspired by a pastoral tapestry at Frampton Court in Gloucestershire

Iksel Decorative Arts (020–7351 4414; www.iksel.com) was founded in 1988 and initially specialised in hand-painting panels with scenes from a pre-industrial world featuring different cultures and historical periods. In 2001, the company digitised its archive, evolving its wallpapers into custom frescos. Soon afterwards, Cotswolds-based Zardi & Zardi (01452 814777; www.zardiandzardi.co.uk) began to produce designs based on historic tapestries that, thanks to digital technology, had the patina and subtleties of colour that is the result of hundreds of years of ageing. When, in 2007, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, US, held an exhibition on Baroque tapestry and borrowed the *Siege of Bouchain* from Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, the Met commissioned Zardi & Zardi to make a reproduction to hang for the duration of the exhibition. 'More recently, we provided some designs for Stowe that were based on some tapestries sold in the 1920s,' says founder P. J. Keeling. 'The possibilities are not only exciting, they are also endless.'

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You saw it here first

The gardens may grab the headlines at Chelsea today, but, writes **John Hoyland**, the show's greatest legacy is the plants it brings to our attention

THE garden writer Arthur Hellyer is often quoted for his observation that the RHS Chelsea Flower Show is 'the richest spotting ground in the whole world for new, forgotten or neglected plants'. Hellyer's remark was made in the 1980s, but can be applied to every decade of the show's existence. Although it is now the gardens that grab the headlines, the spotlight the show turns on the plants themselves is, perhaps, its most enduring legacy.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Scottish plant hunter George Forrest collected tens of thousands of plant specimens and seeds. Among these was an evergreen shrub from Yunnan that became known as *Pieris formosa* var. *forrestii* and was presented at Chelsea in 1924. Sporting scented cream panicles and bright-red shoots, the excitement it initially generated has not waned and it continues to be a mainstay of every garden centre and shrub nursery.

Although plants such as the pieris were collected in the wild, many introductions first seen at the show were the result of years of hybridisation by skilled plant breeders. On his allotment in York, George Russell spent two decades breeding lupins, rejecting the weakest seedlings, then crossing and recrossing the strongest and brightest. His aim was to grow vigorous lupins that had large, colourful flowers. By 1938, he was satisfied enough with his plants to exhibit them at that year's Chelsea. Against the gloom of the gathering clouds of war, Russell's brightly coloured lupins →

Sarah Price included Benton End bearded irises in her 2023 garden, plants originally brought to Chelsea by Sarah Cooke in 2015

Left: ***Cirsium rivulare*** **'Atropurpureum' was a huge hit at Chelsea in 2000.** *Right:* ***Primula auricula*** **'Teem' with a dusting of 'farina'**

Left: ***Verbascum*** **'Helen Johnson' proved delicate in gardens.** *Right:* ***Geranium*** **'Rozanne' was awarded RHS Plant of the Century**

The pure-white floribunda *Rosa* 'Iceberg', as shown in the White Garden at Sissinghurst Castle, Kent, was the star of the 1958 show

enjoyed an immediate success. Since then, the plants have been in decline, but the Russell hybrids demonstrated that colourful lupins can be bred, an ambition that still informs the work of present-day specialists.

Perhaps the most remarkable rediscovery of a neglected plant in recent memory is that of auriclas. First brought to Britain in the 16th century by Huguenot refugees, these delicate members of the primula family quickly became a favourite of plant collectors and exhibitors throughout Britain. Their popularity continued until the 1970s, by which time only one British nursery was selling the plants. This collection had been bred and nurtured by three generations of the same family and, on his retirement, the nurseryman George Douglas passed his heirlooms to an auricula enthusiast, Brenda Hyatt.

Aided by the RHS, the enterprising Mrs Hyatt presented part of the collection at Chelsea in 1982. No one who stood marvelling at the display that year could ever forget it. Against a background of black velvet, each plant surrounded by a gilt frame, were flowers that could have been fashioned by Fabergé. Few exhibits have had such an immediate impact, both on the public and on nurserymen, with gardeners scrambling to grow them and auricula theatres appearing throughout the country. Mrs Hyatt's display ensured their survival for future generations.

Some plants become Chelsea stalwarts simply by virtue of flowering in late May without needing to be forced on or held back. Always present at the show are alliums, verbascums, roses and, perhaps the most ubiquitous plant both in gardens and in the Floral Pavilion, bearded irises. Irises have been presented in massed ranks by nurseries such as Kelways or as single isolated specimens, a style first used to great effect in Christopher Bradley-Hole's 1997 Latin garden. Iris breeders are keen to promote their new plants at the show, but it was a collection of forgotten varieties that recently made the most impact. During the 1940s and 1950s, the artist Cedric Morris had bred and named more than 90 varieties of iris, which over the following decades had fallen out of fashion, their subtle colour variation and delicate speckling superseded by more flamboyant varieties.

> 'Few displays have had such an impact as that of Brenda Hyatt's auriculas in 1982'

Sarah Cook, a former head gardener at Sissinghurst Castle in Kent, tracked down 36 of them and with the help of Howard Nurseries presented the collection to an admiring audience at the 2015 show. Morris's irises have unfussy flowers in tones of pale lemon or faded mauves and pinks, often with intricate veining. They are at ease in modern, naturalistic plantings and, although fashions may well swing back towards the exuberant forms, the attention focused on these irises during Chelsea has helped ensure their survival.

Roses are always everywhere at the show and, each year, both old cultivars and the latest introductions are celebrated. Perhaps the world's most famous rose was presented there in 1948. Originally bred by Frenchman Francis Meilland and named after his mother, samples were sent to nurseries in Europe and America just before the German invasion of France. Subsequently renamed 'Peace', its pale-yellow scented flowers blushed with pink have made it what rose expert Peter Beale has described as 'the finest Hybrid Tea ever raised'.

Not all plants that create a splash at the show stand the test of time. The 2000 show garden of designers Arne Maynard and Piet Oudolf contained dozens of an unusual thistle-like perennial, *Cirsium rivulare* 'Atropurpureum'. The sight of deep-crimson flowers →

Cirsium rivulare **was a crowd pleaser when it appeared in Tom Stuart-Smith's 2005 garden**

swaying in the breeze at the top of slender stems held an instant appeal to show visitors and it became a 'must-have' plant. Micropropagation ensured that it was readily available in every garden centre, but its popularity soon declined and is now only found in specialist nurseries. A similar fate befell a mullein, *Verbascum* 'Helen Johnson', which appeared as a seedling at Kew Gardens in 1990. The unusual coppery-pink flowers and soft-grey foliage created a mania for the plant, particularly among garden designers. Unfortunately, her beauty faded in the eyes of gardeners as the plant proved short lived and difficult to keep alive for more than a couple of years.

In 2010, the RHS instigated the Plant of the Year award to highlight the best of the recent introductions and rediscovered plants. It is too soon to say if any of the winning plants will be popular in decades to come. Every show, however, holds out the promise of new wonders. Who knows what this year will bring? Perhaps we will witness the baptism of a rose as enduring as 'Peace', find ourselves marvelling at new plants as intoxicating as Russell's lupins or be left awestruck by a display as inspiring and consequential as Mrs Hyatt's auriculas.

The Country Life *'Outdoor Drawing Room' is at stand PW210 at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, May 20–24. For more information, visit www.countrylife.co.uk or www.rhs.org.uk*

Chelsea winners

Rosa **'Iceberg' ('Korbin')**
A pure-white floribunda rose that was the star of the show in 1958. It is still popular as a bush, a standard or a climbing rose

Cornus **'Eddie's White Wonder'**
The sparkling white overlapping bracts won many hearts when the shrub was shown in 1972. With a bonus of vibrant autumn foliage, it continues to seduce

Geranium **'Rozanne'**
Floriferous, easy to grow and with startling blue flowers, this was a winner from the moment it was shown in 2000 and, 13 years later, it received the RHS Plant of the Century award

Heuchera villosa **'Palace Purple'**
A seedling from Kew first shown in the 1980s that displayed the possibilities of the genus and inspired breeders to produce the huge range of colourful heucheras that we see today

Erysimum **'Bowles's Mauve'**
A tough perennial wallflower that is smothered in blooms for months on end. Although it becomes woody after a few years, it remains as popular today as it was when plantswoman Frances Perry presented it in 1982

Andrew Sydenham/Country Life/Future Publishing Ltd; Jonathan Buckley

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STRUCTURAL 25 YEAR GUARANTEE

Steven Desmond

The mysterious tree peony

THE idea of the tree peony inspires a nervous thrill among gardeners. It is one of those plants that are perceived as best suited to the specialist, like rhododendrons and camellias: particular about conditions, liable to fail for want of expert care and altogether mysteriously Oriental. Gardening is a rational business, however, and every plant benefits from a certain amount of homework to discover its ideal habitat, so here goes with a one-page demystification manual.

***Paeonia ludlowii* is well used to the cold; this tree peony thrives in mountainous Tibet**

First, let us separate the tree peonies from their herbaceous counterparts. One of the glories of May and June is the magnificent display of the herbaceous peonies, from 'Sarah Bernhardt' to 'Bowl of Beauty', only let down by their desire to go face down in the mud after a shower of rain. We need not worry about them. You should have tied them up earlier, as you very well know. Our subject today is the tree peony, which, like a rose tree, is not a tree at all, but a shrub. It is a tall, ungainly thing, often seen with awkwardly placed woody shoots that seem unpromising until the whole thing bursts into thrilling flower against a handsome backdrop of deeply cut and lobed foliage, the moment when doubt evaporates and all is forgiven.

The colour of that flower is liable to be either brilliant yellow or some form of red through pink, even to lilac-purple, and, of course, there are white forms. The flower is large and shapely, sometimes improbably so, and they can be fringed and tend to drape themselves luxuriously against the leaves. Plant breeders have worked on tree peonies for hundreds of years, so that double forms are numerous, all the more likely to bow down under their own weight before your very eyes.

Part of the aura of doubt surrounding these majestic shrubs concerns their hardiness. Those ungainly shoots, curiously stiff, typically bear the marks in this country of frost damage, with one shoot cut short and others taking its place. The tree peony, however, comes from China, a country far colder than this one in winter and considerably hotter in summer. One of the straight species, *Paeonia ludlowii*, a 7ft showstopper with flowers of brilliant yellow, grows wild in Tibet, so we need not worry that it gets too cold on these temperate shores. Then again, the finest display of tree peonies I have ever seen was in the splendid botanic garden of Berlin, a seemingly endless border featuring nothing but these species and hybrids, a vision of deep pink in May. Berlin in winter is very much colder than Britain.

> 'Its woody shoots seem unpromising until the whole thing bursts into thrilling flower'

The danger here is in the character of the British spring. When winter ends in Germany, and presumably also in Tibet, the temperature graph rises steadily, but, in this country, it fluctuates, irregularly alternating frosty spells with mild ones—it's happening as I write—so that the soft new tissue is suddenly clobbered and blackened and has to make a fresh start. This prompts a general panic in my garden, in which dusk sees me put a hat consisting of canes, an upturned flowerpot and a drape of hessian over the promising flowerbuds whenever the night air turns crisp. It is a labour of love, but also a bit of a fag.

Other trees and shrubs from kindred climates face the same difficulty here. A tulip tree in England produces a pleasant, but unreliable display of its fascinating flowers in early summer, but in central Germany it is routinely covered from head to foot in those same flowers every year without fail. It's that graph again.

Many people are put off by the idea of all this faff, but plenty of others rightly respond to the challenge when the reward is obviously worthwhile. Some things are worth persevering with, as Robert Fortune discovered in the early 1840s when, spotting a man walking through a Chinese town with tree peonies protruding from his rucksack, he made enquiries and was told they had come from a nursery many miles away. Sceptical of this, he followed the man on his return journey to the nursery a short distance outside the town. His sponsors, whom we now call the RHS, were delighted with the results of Fortune's persistence and we are all the long-term beneficiaries.

Gardening teaches us many things, including the gradual understanding that each site, each year, each season has its pros and cons, and that one day it will all come together in brief perfection. Now might be the time.

Steven Desmond's book *Gardens of the Italian Lakes*, with photography by Marianne Majerus, is published by Frances Lincoln

Next week Sorrel

Horticultural aide-mémoire

Repair lawns

With turf growing vigorously now, this is a good time to repair a lawn. If a lawn edge is damaged, use a half-moon edging iron to cut out a square of turf around the damage and neatly cut under the turf 1in deep. Set the square of turf aside and then ruffle the surface of the exposed soil. Return the square of turf, placing it so that the damage is on the inside and the straight edge opposite aligns with its neighbours. Take a handful or two of fine soil and fill in the damage, with a scatter of grass seed worked in. **SCD**

Alamy; Shutterstock

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Kitchen garden cook Mint

by Melanie Johnson

Easy chocolate and mint ice creams

Ingredients
For the mint ice cream
200ml whole milk
100g fresh mint leaves, roughly torn
400ml double cream
1 x 400g tin sweetened condensed milk
A pinch of sea salt

For the chocolate shell
300g dark chocolate (70% cocoa solids)
2tbspn coconut oil
A pinch of sea salt
Ice-cream moulds (silicone, ideally)

Method
1 Gently heat the milk in a small saucepan until just simmering, then remove from the heat and stir in the mint leaves. Cover and let steep for 30 minutes to infuse. Strain the milk, pressing the leaves to extract all the flavour, then chill the milk completely.
2 Whip the double cream until soft peaks form, then fold in the chilled mint-infused milk, condensed milk and sea salt, then mix until smooth. Pour the mixture into silicone moulds, insert ice-cream sticks and freeze for at least six hours until firm.
3 Melt the dark chocolate with the coconut oil until smooth, then allow to cool slightly. Remove the ice creams from their moulds and dip each one into the chocolate, letting the excess drip off. Sprinkle with flaky sea salt and place on a lined tray.
4 Freeze for another 30 minutes to set.
5 Serve the ice creams straight from the freezer.

More ways with mint

Charred pineapple with mint sugar and coconut yoghurt

Prepare a whole pineapple and cut into large chunks. Toss these in a couple of spoonfuls of brown sugar and a splash of rum, if you like, to coat all over. Heat a griddle pan and grill the pineapple chunks until caramelised and charred. Make the mint sugar by processing 50g caster sugar and 10g fresh mint leaves in a food processor. Spoon coconut yogurt onto plates, arrange the charred pineapple on top, sprinkle with mint sugar and add lime zest.

Melanie Johnson

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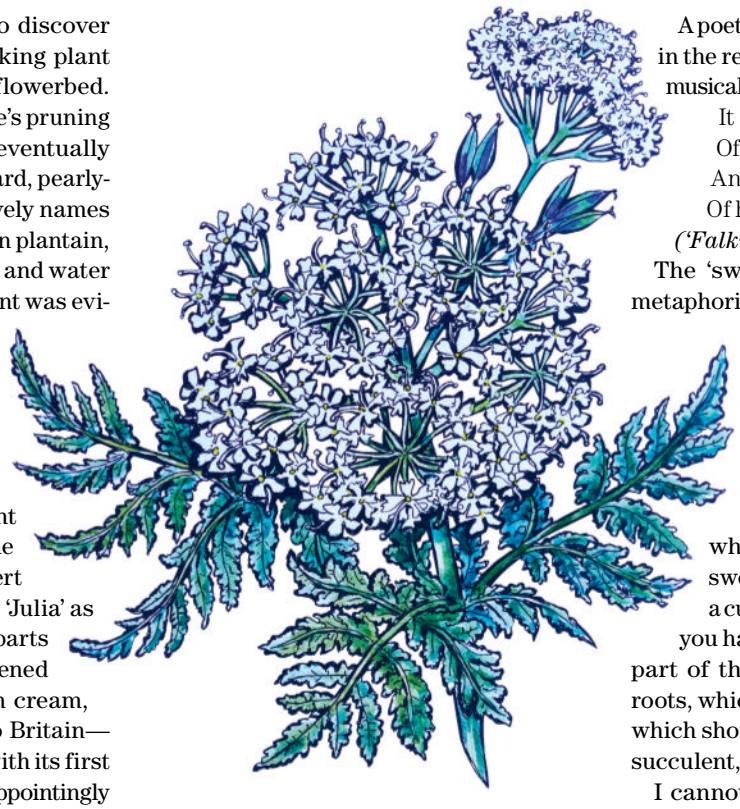
The sweetest thing

As pretty as its name, with top notes of aniseed perfume and a kiss more saccharine than sucrose, this perennial is enough to inspire poetry, says **John Wright**

Illustration by Kateryna Kyslitska

I WAS delighted last year to discover an uninvited and odd-looking plant flourishing nicely in our flowerbed. After saving it from my wife's pruning shears, I watched it grow and eventually harvested its diminutive, glass-hard, pearly-white seeds. We have endless lovely names for our plants: betony, buck's-horn plantain, dove's-foot cranesbill, toothwort and water forget-me-not, but my visiting plant was evidently at the back of the queue with 'gromwell', a name one might expect for a Dickensian mechanical of ill repute. Sweet cicely, by contrast, was first.

Sweet cicely, sweet cicely… I have always fancied this might have been a better choice for the libidinous 17th-century poet Robert Herrick, who took the imaginary 'Julia' as his muse. It could have been two parts of sweet cicely's body that he likened to strawberries half drowned in cream, but the plant was a latecomer to Britain—Herrick missing it by 100 years, with its first record in the wild being 1772. Disappointingly and prosaically, the plant's name doesn't derive from a female muse or even a saint, but from *seseli*, the Latin name for its Mediterranean relative in the carrot family, hartwort.



> 'The immature seed pods can be eaten as sugar-free sweets'

A plant imported from the mountains of southern and central Europe, sweet cicely is a denizen of the North in Britain. It is near-absent in the South and one of the pleasures of venturing north of Nottingham—especially as far as the Lothians—is to see this plant take the place in hedgerows of the more boorish cow parsley (*Foraging*, *March 19*), a plant for which it can be mistaken from a distance (and upwind). Here, it is largely a lowland plant of hedges, wood edges and stream sides. Its most telling habitat is around abandoned cottages, betraying its use as a planted herb. This was nicely recognised in verse by Scottish botanist and poet William Gardiner: 'Oft by the peasant's cot the humble myrrh,/His meet companion, doth unfold its leaves,/Of pleasant green, and umbels of fair flowers.' 'Myrrh' is an alternative name for the plant and its Latin moniker is *Myrrhis odorata*. It can grow readily enough in the far south, but evidently chooses not to. I had a splendid plant in my Dorset garden, but it died after four years; too short a life for a perennial.

Sweet cicely is as lovely as its name, with dainty, fern-like leaves. It is faintly furry all over, the umbels untidy and the seedheads distinctively upright and prominent. Its 'knock-down' characteristic, however, is its smell. Crush any part of the plant and you should smell aniseed. It is very much like fennel, but more delicate and distinctly sweeter.

The smell of aniseed is that of anethole, one of a family of organic chemicals (phenylpropanoids) that undertake numerous tasks in many plants, not least as a deterrent against insect larvae. In sweet cicely, the essential oil that contains the anethole also carries seven more aromatics, including limonene and alpha-pinene, respectively the smell of oranges and turpentine.

A poet writing in praise of the plant—and in the regrettable ABBA (not the Swedish musical combo) rhyming scheme—tells us:

It beareth in its odour sweet,
Of Nature's each wild-flower the scent,
And in it Memories are spent,
Of highland breeze and summer heat.
('Falkirk Herald' of 1875)

The 'sweet' in the plant's name is not metaphorical: sweet cicely really does have a sweet taste, one occurring entirely in the absence of sugar. Instead, it derives this property from anethole, which is 10 times sweeter than sucrose. This is most easily experienced by chewing on the (immature) seed pods, which can be eaten as sugar-free sweets. These much-prized pods are a cut-and-come again resource, should you have a supply ready to hand. Every part of the plant is edible, including the roots, which may be roasted, and the stems, which should be collected when young and succulent, then peeled.

I cannot leave my earlier cultural ramblings without mentioning what must be the harshest and most amusing two lines in English verse. They come courtesy of my dear grandfather and I believe them to be of 18th-century vintage: 'Sing, sweet Cicely, sing no more,/Till love be deaf as well as blind.'

One for the liquorice fans

As someone unable to endure aniseed flavours in anything other than the aniseed balls of my youth, liquorice and, yes, sweet cicely seed pods, I hesitate to recommend my go-to method for all things—infuse it in vodka. Nevertheless, if you like ouzo or Pernod, do give it a try.

Perhaps more sensibly, the early appearance of sweet cicely invites its use with rhubarb. Finely chop the succulent young stems and mix them with chopped rhubarb. A foraging friend from Scotland, Monica Wilde, who suggests this method, says that no sugar will be needed, but a little honey would surely do no harm.

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John Lewis-Stempel

In cloud cuckoo land

On a vivid yet bracing April morning, **John Lewis-Stempel** savours the increasingly rare privilege of hearing a cuckoo's evocative call echoing over the meadows and rejoices in this special herald of spring

Illustration by Michael Frith

A BRIGHT cold morning in April and the church clock strikes 11. As the clanging of brass fades away, a cuckoo calls out from the greening wood on the hilltop. Then, the sound of silence. A vacuum, an interval in which I fear that, in a madness of ornithological desire, I have mistaken a cooing wood pigeon for the *cu-cu*-ing migrant bird. Yet then it comes, indubitably, that glorious, bass-tone woodwind cry. *Cou-cou*. And louder now. Echoing, echoing down through the trees and meadows until it fills the narrow valley. The cuckoo is icumen in. The world still turns.

The first cuckoo of spring was once an event requiring a letter to *The Times* and a day off for farm labourers, who retired with a barrel of celebratory beer to the spinney where the bird was heard. Such is the scarcity of *Cuculus canorus* in England nowadays that any cuckoo, whenever, is worth a missive and a mug in celebration. The bird is largely restricted to high ground, such as here in the western Marches. A pity. The distinctive diphone *cuckoo-cuckoo* seemed to emanate from every copse in lowland Herefordshire in the 1970s, when I was young and England was bird rich. My grandma taught me the country ditty: 'Cuckoo, cuckoo…/ What do you do?/In April, I open my bill.'

> 'Every child should be able to hear the call of the cuckoo. It should be the law'

Every child should be able to hear the call of the cuckoo. It should be the law. Chaucer declared April the month of meteorological 'shoures'. Certainly, it is the month for showers of migrant birds landing. A few might be here already—the willow warblers and chiffchaffs—but April sees them arriving en masse, as if by calendar ordained. The swallow and the redstart, like the cuckoo, are reliably steady arrivals mid month and on their tails are the wood warbler, sedge warbler and nightingale. Among the last flurry of feathered arrivals is the female cuckoo, who flies in two weeks or so behind the male. She does not *coo-coo*, but gurgles like brook water. Regardless of sex, species or singing ability, the migrant birds come for the great British hatch of April insects. They are carnivorous to the tip of their bills.

If April does have a typical sky, it is a morning such as this: chill, brilliant blue, puffy cloud. The first male cuckoo always seems to sing on a morning like this—or is it that the bird's notes carry further in air of such clarity? The air of April is particular and pure and suits the transmission of birdsong. In April, the voices of the migrant birds have the vitality and promise of pioneers reaching new lands. May's dawn chorus may be louder, more polyphonic—the avian choir is at fullest—but give me the dawn chorus of April, the month of the sweet meeting of meteorology and birdsong.

Despite all the teeming avian heralds of spring, the cuckoo remains special. Our naming of spring's wildflowers in honour of the cuckoo suggests that its status as primary primaveral portent is old, very old, a pagan rite. The folk name for wood sorrel is cuckoo's meat, lords-and-ladies is cuckoo pint and lady's smock is cuckoo flower—and so forth. All suggestive that it was the cuckoo, of all birds, that carried spring on its back.

Something else: the booming notes of the male are easily recognisable, easily imitable, so human. The French use *coucou* as a familiar greeting, although the British ornithologist Revd C. A. Johns, one of the last of the nation's parson naturalists, went so far as to claim in his guidebook, *British Birds in Their Haunts* (1909), that 'no bird in a state of nature utters a note approaching so closely the sound of the human voice as the Cuckoo'.

Cuculus canorus, unlike Victorian children, is more commonly heard than seen. It is secretive and stealthy, all the better for the commando raid by the hen to lay her eggs in the nest of other birds. The bird's homicidal parasitism, which extends to the fledgling cuckoo ejecting its step-sibling nestlings into oblivion, is an obvious fascination, a true crime story by Nature. Chaucer, if misidentifying April's weather, early noted

the cuckoo as malefic. In his 1381 poem *The Parlement of Foules*, the bird is 'the cukkow ever unkynde,' 'mordrer of the heysugge [hedge sparrow]'.

The bird's physical appearance, which is lean and hawkish, only adds to its intimation of power. As late as the 18th century, with no proper understanding of migration, people suspected that the cuckoo transmogrified into the kestrel in autumn, for how else to explain its mysterious disappearance at summer's end? We could laugh at the ignorance, except that, to this day, the bird's ability to paint its eggs in mimicry of the host species is marvellous.

You remember your first definite sighting of a cuckoo like you remember your first trip to the cinema, your first foreign holiday. I was seven and on the swing under my grandparents' damson tree, when a cuckoo perched on the rose trellis across the lawn. Helpfully, for a tyro ornithologist, the bird adopted the dipped querying pose of page 62 of *The Observer's Book of Birds* dedicated to 'The Common Cuckoo'. My close-up views of the bird since then have been few. Well, it is shy and increasingly uncommon and shape-shifts. You might easily have mistaken one for a sparrowhawk, a kestrel or even a fleet-a-wing collared dove.

For those who stand and stare, sometimes you get what you want. On this bright, cold April morning as the village clock noted the half hour past 11, the cuckoo sped low over my head, the black bars on its chest as evident as prison garb.

It felt like relief—the spring bird had come—but monitory, too. The cuckoo brings in spring; yet, in July, it steals the summer away. I turned to work the warming land.

Twice crowned victor of the Wainwright Prize for Nature writing for 'Where Poppies Blow' and 'Meadowland', John Lewis-Stempel's latest book, 'England: A Natural History', is out now (Doubleday, £25)

Today's pollen account

Pollen often hits the headlines for making us sneeze, but it plays a vital role in far more serious matters, says **Ian Morton**

Nature's pot of gold: carried by bees to feed their colonies, pollen is the male part of a plant's reproductive system seeking a mate

THE season is well and truly upon us—and it's a long one. Those billowing yellow clouds put out by the yews were the first visible sign of the tree-pollen campaign that lasts from March into mid May. Grass pollens take up the cause into June and weeds sustain it through to September's end. In the UK an estimated 13 million people are susceptible to pollen and combatting hay fever—allergic rhinitis caused by pollen, or pollinosis—is an industry. Yet all the floral world wants to do is procreate.

> 'Pollens have a unique DNA, proving vital in criminal investigations'

Protected by a sporopollenin coating to resist solar radiation and drying out, every tiny grain of pollen contains two male gametes, each providing an element necessary for fertilisation when a compatible female stigma is encountered. Pollens are males in search of females. Sometimes, bees get there first, carrying grains to the hive to ferment and feed the colony. Otherwise, it might be ladybirds, especially if the pollen comes from flat-topped flowers; the shiny little beetles of the *Nitidulidae* family that specialise in a pollen diet; or the species of *Syrphidae* hoverfly that dissolve pollen grains in an enzyme fluid to digest them. These incursions are welcome, for such activity hustles and transmits other grains to their rightful destination.

One insect that benefits from pollen makes no such contribution. The garden spider *Araneus diadematus* spins its signature wheel of a web to net flies, but captures pollen, too—in significant quantities. Working with fellow researchers in Bern, Switzerland, Dr Dirk Sanders of Exeter University's ecology and conservation centre has determined that pollen accounts for 25% of its diet. 'Most people think of spiders as pure carnivores,' he reports. 'We've demonstrated that the family of orb web spiders feeds on pollen caught in their webs… we need to class them as omnivores. Pollen grains are actively consumed after being coated in a digestive enzyme.'

On the human front, the study of pollen, palynology, extends far beyond the battle against hay fever. There are 380,000 plant species worldwide, all producing pollens with unique DNA and this is proving vital in criminal investigations. Amounts of different pollens can even determine an exact location. An early example was recorded in Austria in 1959, when Viennese analyst Wilhelm Klaus studied the muddy boots of a suspect, finding spruce, willow and alder pollens and fossilised hickory grains 20 million years old—all of which led to the exact spot where the victim was buried. US expert Andrew Laurence has described the pollen print of a region as its fingerprint and pollen analysis became admissible evidence in UK courts in the 1970s.

Leading UK palynologist Patricia Wiltshire, who has provided evidence in some 300 cases, including high-profile murders, describes in her book *Traces* 'the imprint the landscape has left on you… pollen, spores and other microscopic material, mixtures of palynomorphs'. One pollen grain 'might be an orb pitted with tiny holes, while another may be shaped like a dumbbell'. Such grains are 'the foundation of the stories I unravel… whispers telling me you are lying or twisting truths'.

Perhaps the most dramatic evidence in the modern pollen story was in the trial of Bosnian war criminals. The defence claimed bodies in scattered graves were the result of local skirmishes. On the basis of pollen traces common to all the victims, forensic palynology proved that they had been massacred in a wheatfield and thrown into a mass grave, then later dug up and reburied in different locations to disguise the atrocity.

Bless you

• Pollen is Latin for a fine powder or flour. It was recommended as a palliative in ancient Greece and Rome and, in Egypt, it was 'a powder that gives life'. As a food supplement, it was known historically as bee bread

• Fossilised pollen dates back to the Devonian period, 350 million years ago

• Pollens 'represent a unique archive of the Earth's climatic history,' says Vera Korasidis of Melbourne University in Australia. Studying fossilised pollens from 56 million years ago, a period of global warming, Dr Korasidis has concluded that, through seed dispersal, plants migrated to cooler and higher areas

• Hay fever was first described and named by physician John Bostock in 1819. A sufferer who tried bleeding, cold baths, opium and vomiting as solutions, he found respite only in sea air

• UK pollen counts, broadcast since 2011, have gone high-tech. Real-time analysis uses polarised- and ultra-violet-light devices to alert asthma and allergy sufferers to high densities

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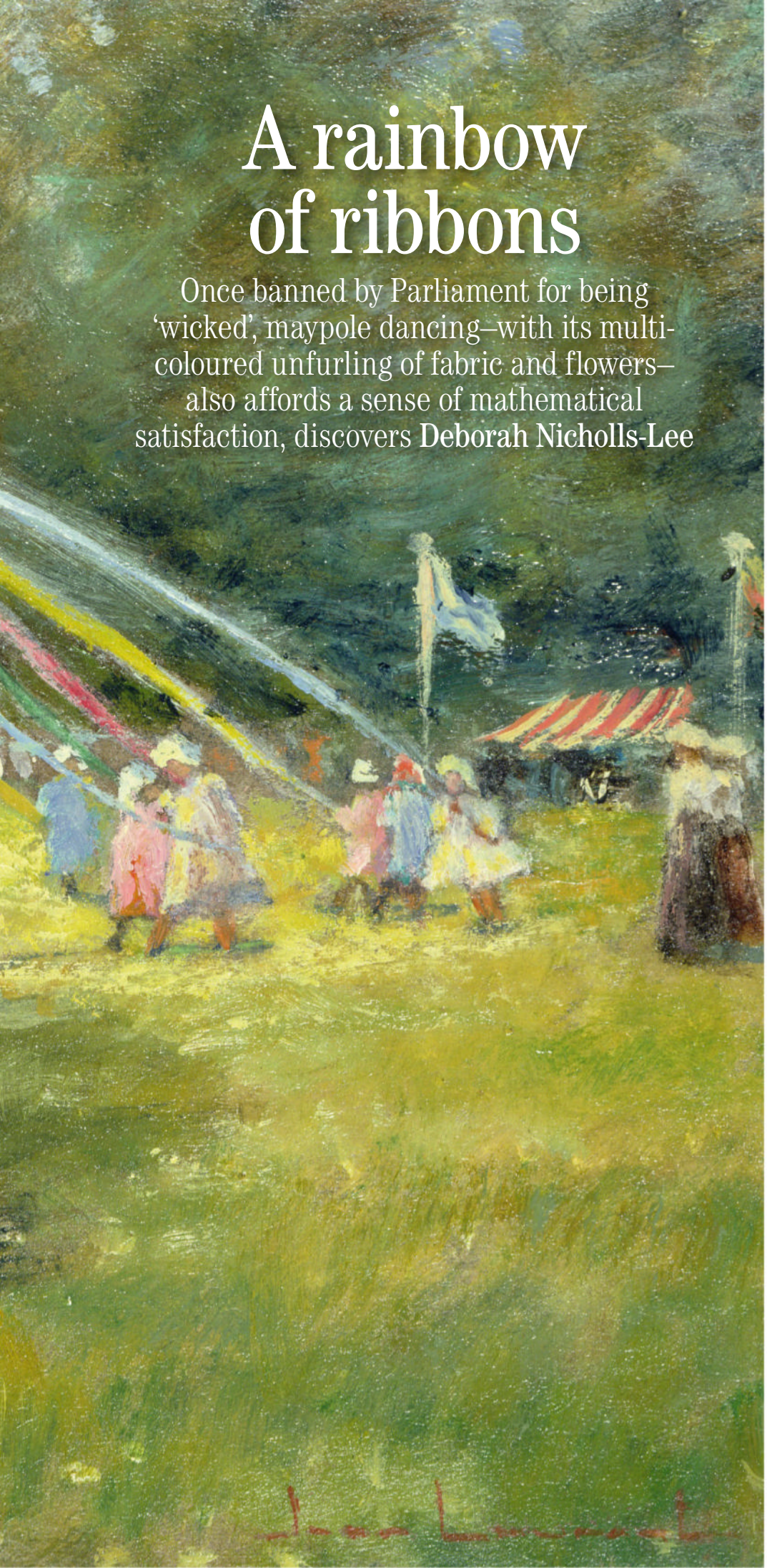
A rainbow of ribbons

Once banned by Parliament for being 'wicked', maypole dancing—with its multi-coloured unfurling of fabric and flowers—also affords a sense of mathematical satisfaction, discovers **Deborah Nicholls-Lee**



THE May-pole is up,/Now give me the cup;/I'll drink to the garlands around it;' rejoices Robert Herrick. 'But first unto those/Whose hands did compose/The glory of flowers that crown'd it.' Few sights are more convivial than a maypole dance, a traditional celebration of the start of summer. Yet, in 1644, about the time of Herrick's poem, the libations he mentions, coupled with much raucous frolicking around the pole, saw the activity banned by a Parliament that deemed it 'a heathenish vanity, generally abused to superstition and wickedness'.

Some 3,000 years before English Puritans took issue with this 17th-century equivalent of a drunken conga, Germanic and Scandic tribes were enacting a maypole dance around a post or tree trunk, in the belief, perhaps, that circles helped banish ill fortune. Some sources suggest that the Romans also revelled around stripped-down trees decorated with flowers as part of the springtime festivals of the Magna Mater and the Floralia, when clothes were thrown off and wild hares—symbols of fertility—were released among the celebrants.

> 'Dancing around the maypole was the 17th-century equivalent of a drunken conga'

Cities were not immune to such frenzied 'mayings', according to John Stow's *Survey of London* (1603), which documents a capital animated by Morris dancers, stage plays and street bonfires. When the Puritans snuffed out this heathen mayhem, the maypole, its most visible symbol, became the target of angry mobs who cut them to pieces.

Although reinstated under Charles II, the maypole dance dwindled over the next 200 years, leading to nostalgic evocations of the festival in literature. In the 'Wessex' of Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, for example, 'the instincts of merry England lingered on… with exceptional vitality'. Employing imagery that explains a lot about the Puritans' objections, he continues: 'There stood the Maypole in the middle of the green, its top cutting into the sky. It had sprung up in the night, or rather early morning, like Jack's bean-stalk.' We also learn of 'the sweet perfume of the flowers' on the pole that 'spread into the surrounding air' and enjoy a description of its crown of 'crossed hoops decked with small flowers' followed by 'a milk-white zone of Maybloom' →

Full of the joys: Jean Laurent's *At the Fete*, with the ancient symbol of summer's arrival

amid layers of bluebells, cowslips, lilacs, ragged-robins and daffodils.

The maypole was danced with renewed vigour in the late-Victorian era, but was now a visual spectacle—a theatrical dance act performed by women in pristine white dresses—rather than a pagan rite. The highlight of the open-air show was the crowning of a virtuous young woman as the May queen, who would then preside over the festival on a throne festooned with flowers. The ceremony is still enacted across the country, from the Dartmoor village of Lustleigh, where, in the orchard, the names of the May queens are inscribed in rock, to Whitelands College in south-west London. There, in the 1880s, the writer and art critic John Ruskin added ribbons to the ritual, establishing the dance we recognise today.

Ruskin's work training student teachers forged a new incarnation of the maypole dance: physical education. School children could now experience the joy of steering a satin ribbon through their fellow dancers and watching a magical pattern appear. Picking up where Ruskin left off is folk musician Mike Ruff, co-author of *The Maypole Manual* (2014). Mr Ruff, who has taught hundreds of classes, was struggling to meet the demand for lessons and keen to spread the know-how. 'The need for the manual became clear,' he notes. Now, thanks in part to the manual and its recorded music, maypole teaching has proliferated.

The weaving of ribbons into a multi-coloured web is beneficial for both body and mind. 'It's a different way of thinking,' observes Mr Ruff, who enjoys the mathematics behind the patterns. 'It's an activity that gets people out from behind their desks… [and] it's a group thing where individual expertise is not so important.'

Where once the dancing was accompanied by English bagpipes or the pipe and tabor, the fiddle and accordion now set the beat. Naturally, the dance is not without its disasters. 'The archetypal maypole dance is "The Plait", but it sometimes gives people nightmares because it can go wrong quite easily,' says Mr Ruff. To avoid a tangle, he recommends starting with 'The Barber's Pole', with its bold stripes, or 'Chrysanthemum', in which the pattern recalls the long petals of its namesake. 'All you're doing is going under and over; but, from the outside, it looks amazing.'

The archetypal maypole festooned with ribbons only appeared in the late 19th century

The merry month of May

• In the West Yorkshire village of Barwick-in-Elmet, a 'raising ceremony' featuring an 85ft-long maypole is followed by an equally nail-biting climb to lower the guide ropes. The climber is then urged to press on to the top to 'spin the fox', a weathervane thought to bestow good luck on the village

• May dew, as documented in the diary of Samuel Pepys, was once thought to be a wonderful skin tonic. Women would collect the dew at dawn, often by wringing out a linen cloth left out overnight and storing it in a glass bottle (*left*)

• In the 19th century, Jack in the Green, a man dressed as a tree, was a striking feature of the May Day procession. The Jacks, typically local chimney sweeps, were then 'slain' (divested of their leaves) to release the spirit of summer. The tradition endures in Hastings, Kent, where Jack and his green-faced entourage headline a lively festival

• Birching is a mischievous medieval custom, ostensibly to promote good health, where decorated birch twigs, originating from the maypole tree, were used to smack the feet and hands of maidens who were taking part in the May festivities

• Accidents are commonplace at the centuries-old cheese-rolling competition in Brockworth, Gloucestershire, which is rumoured to originate from a fertility ritual or a desperate attempt to maintain grazing rights

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The once and future master

With his quiet landscape prints, Utagawa Hiroshige brought beauty into the everyday life of 19th-century Japan, but his influence also reached across time and space to inspire Vincent van Gogh, James McNeill Whistler and many contemporary artists

HIROSHIGE is not of the past.' Alfred Haft, lead curator of the British Museum's forthcoming exhibition on the Japanese *ukiyo-e* artist, makes a bold assertion, considering that Hiroshige (1797–1858) was born when George III reigned over England, died when Victoria had been on the throne for a mere 21 years and—unlike his near-contemporary Katsushika Hokusai, king of *The Great Wave*—has been relatively neglected in contemporary Britain. 'Hiroshige: artist of the open road' is not only the first exhibition on the *ukiyo-e* master ever held at the British Museum, but also the first of its kind and scale held in a public venue in London for the past 25 years.

***Evening View of the Eight Scenic Spots of Kanazawa in Musashi Province*, Hiroshige, 1857**

Yet, Dr Haft is right: Hiroshige was and remains an incredibly important artist. Born (as Andô Tokutarô) in the low ranks of the samurai, one-time warriors turned into the administrative elite of the ruling Togukawa shogunate, 'he grew up as a successor to a position in the Shogun's fire department, so he lived in a barracks'. From a very early age, however, he showed a facility for drawing that eventually led him to join the studio of a very popular artist of the Floating World, Utagawa Toyohiro.

The *ukiyo*, or Floating World, was the realm of *kabuki* theatre, courtesans, pleasure houses and the people who depicted them, but Toyohiro was different from other artists: 'He had quieter style, so there was a sympathy of temperaments, perhaps between Hiroshige and [him].' This doesn't mean that Hiroshige left his samurai upbringing entirely behind. 'He was commissioned in about 1849–51 to produce perhaps 200 hanging scrolls for a high-ranking samurai domain in northern Japan, so he had strong connections with [that] community, and enjoyed sword demonstrations. He always thought of himself, in a way, as a samurai, but he didn't take it too seriously.' He even requested a samurai funeral in his will, although he then changed his mind.

His first known work dates from about 1818—drawings for a book of witty Kyoka poetry—after which he had a steady career as a Floating World artist, but something changed in 1830: he took up landscapes. Hiroshige had a deep affinity with the subject, which he approached in a very understated way, introducing to this genre the style he had learned from Toyohiro. As an example, Dr Haft mentions a picture of the Sumida River that flows through Tokyo (then Edo): 'During the summer, it thronged with pleasure boats and fireworks and crowds, but Hiroshige presented [it] earlier in the evening, before all this activity started, as if inviting the viewer to be the first to arrive. He [provided] an opportunity to savour places in quieter moments than anyone had previously seen them.'

> 'If ever there was an artist that didn't live up to the trope of the tortured soul, that was Hiroshige'

If ever there was an artist that didn't live up to the trope of the tortured soul, that was Hiroshige and not only because of the sense of quietude that his prints conveyed. He was rather the *bon vivant*, at least until, aged 60, he shaved his head and became a lay Buddhist monk. As Danish art historian Hans Bjarne Thomsen wrote in Japanese Arts journal *Impressions*, Hiroshige was always one for a party, excelled at writing comic poems (despite his poor handwriting and shaky grasp of grammar), produced designs for a series called 'Famous Restaurants of Edo' and his travel diary entries centred not on his work, but, according to Mr Thomsen, 'on his almost daily drinking bouts (*sakamori*)... One entry ends with the laconic "drank saké until dawn, then slept at another house," and another with "I was thoroughly drunk today"'. As well as saké, Hiroshige loved travelling, *kabuki* theatre—he worked for provincial merchants who commissioned him to design stage backdrops—and socialising, which must have helped him get along with his 90 or so different publishers.

The Japanese printing business wasn't in the habit of supporting artistic endeavour for the sake of it—publishers were rather cautious and watched closely how well the market reacted. With Hiroshige, there was no doubt people reacted well: he became phenomenally popular, drawing landscape after landscape from 1830 almost until his death in 1858—often revisiting the same places, 'but always somehow reinventing them,' according to Dr Haft. His prints were made in multiple versions and kept being

reproduced (sometimes even with worn-out blocks, to the detriment of quality, but in testament to the burgeoning demand for his work).

However, his approach was radically different from that of the other sought-after landscape maestro of the times, Hokusai. Hiroshige himself noted this, when he compared his own views of Mount Fuji with those of the older artist: 'Filled with the power of his brush, his work focused upon making things interesting… I simply reproduce sketches of what I had seen before my eyes.' For Dr Haft, Hokusai's prints 'jump at the viewers', whereas Hiroshige gently invites people into his pictures. Through the simplicity and balance of his compositions, the large forms, but also techniques such as colour gradations, he made viewers feel as if they were at a window looking out onto a view, 'into a world that was familiar and yet in some sense more beautiful—a fantastic, wonderful version of the way the world might be'.

Welcome to the gentle river: Hiroshige's *Seba* from *The 69 Stations of the Kiso Highway*

> 'His work requires slow looking–you look closely, take time with the pictures and they invite a dialogue'

His prints provided a welcome retreat into scenic beauty at a time when Japan was facing a difficult moment. Although the ruling Tokugawa shogunate had ensured centuries of stability, the 1830s saw famine, the 1840s the failure of austerity reforms (and the ousting of the man who had introduced them) and the 1850s the increasingly concerning presence of foreign fleets in Japanese waters. 'Hiroshige knew about all this, he was living in his day, so why didn't he depict any of it?' ponders Dr Haft.

Although no commercial artist would have done so directly, some of his contemporaries hinted at the troubles of their time, whether through *kabuki* theatre prints or military themes that featured violence. However, Hiroshige saw that people needed solace and not only did he provide it with his prints, but he also brought his art into their everyday lives with fans. 'These are flat, fixed fans that would have been used for a couple of days and then discarded,' notes Dr Haft. 'He designed more of these than almost any other artist. Why would somebody be dedicated to an art form that he knew people were going to throw away, literally? He must have been a very generous person, thinking about the way people were going to engage with his work and the idea that [it] would bring relief and comfort in daily life.' There's an entire section devoted to Hiroshige's fans in the British Museum's exhibition, which Dr Haft thinks will surprise visitors, as it's hard to believe such a practical, daily object could be infused with so much beauty.

Yet, Hiroshige's work resonated well beyond Japan and the dying throes of the Edo period, influencing first the Impressionists and post-Impressionists, who collected *ukiyo-e* prints, and, later, modern and contemporary artists. For example, he used both European perspective and traditional East Asian approaches, combining different viewpoints in a single picture, and 'it is possible that van Gogh, who famously copied two of Hiroshige's paintings in oil, observed this and incorporated [it] into his own work at the time'. James McNeill Whistler's *Nocturne: Blue and Gold—Old Battersea Bridge* is also remarkably similar in composition to Hiroshige's *Bamboo Yards*, *Kyōbashi Bridge* print.

Still inspiring: Emily Allchurch's *Tokyo Story 12: Spring Festival (after Hiroshige)*

Most artists, however, have borrowed and reinterpreted elements from the Japanese master's works, rather than reproducing them faithfully. Dr Haft mentions London-based Julian Opie, who has called Hiroshige his artistic hero and has created lenticular postcards—the kind that looks tridimensional when you hold them up—based on views of Mount Fuji. 'They're incredibly layered, in the spirit of Hiroshige.' Japanese artist Noda Tetsuya has included woodblocks and Hiroshige's typical colour gradations in his pieces and, back in Britain, Emily Allchurch has reassembled the hundreds of photographs she took of Japan in a way that's reminiscent of the Japanese master's *One Hundred Views of Edo* prints.

This, really, is the reason Dr Haft believes that Hiroshige is not a relic of the past. 'He's an artist with whom people are still having discussions, because his work is so interesting and vivid and requires slow looking—you look closely, take time with the pictures and they invite a dialogue. It has been going on since his prints left Japan for Europe in the 1870s and it is going on now, more than 150 years later.'

'Hiroshige: artist of the open road' is at the British Museum, London WC1, from May 1–September 7 (www.britishmuseum.org)

WEIRD & WONDERFUL

SAY Fabergé and eggs spring to mind, but the Russian jewellery house was just as famous for its exquisite miniature animals. In 1907, Charles Henry Bainbridge, Fabergé's London representative, earned a commission from Edward VII to make palm-fitting models of the Sandringham menagerie. Dogs, pigs, horses, birds and rabbits were first sculpted in wax, then carved from gemstones and mounted in gold or silver (some are now on show at 'The Edwardians: Age of Elegance' exhibition at The King's Gallery, London SW1). However, the royal menagerie wasn't the only animal series Fabergé made. Another has been at Castle Howard, North Yorkshire, for generations, tucked in a leather case from which it has emerged occasionally to grace the dinner-party table. It's an eclectic mix of farm and woodland animals— a hare carved from aventurine, a gold-mounted owl—and exotic, often large specimens: a rock-crystal elephant, an obsidian rhinoceros. Yet, the most endearing one barely measures an inch: it's a vole conjured out of smoky quartz, with a curled tail and diamond-set eyes (*left*). The Castle Howard collection will go under the hammer at Sotheby's Fabergé, Gold Boxes & Vertu auction, Geneva, Switzerland, on May 6, with the vole estimated at £20,000–£30,000 (www.sothebys.com).

Many happy returns

JULY 21, 1897 marked the crowning moment of Henry Tate's life. Art had been his great passion and on that day he fulfilled his ambition to give a new museum to the country. As the Prince of Wales opened the National Gallery of British Art (a name that never stuck), Tate conquered his fear of public speaking to wish that the royal presence might 'be taken as a happy augury of its success'. It was. His gallery has not only endured, but —despite some difficult moments— it has brought forth new offshoots: Tate Liverpool (1988), Tate St Ives (1993) and, 25 years ago, Tate Modern, housed in Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's former Bankside power station in London. Although the official 'birthday' of the gallery falls on May 12, it already received an early present last month, when American collectors Jorge M. and Darlene Pérez donated a 19½ft-long triptych by American Abstract Expressionist Joan Mitchell, together with an endowment to fund curatorial research. It is especially apt, as this year also marks the centenary of the painter's birth. Titled *Iva* after Mitchell's German Shepherd dog, the 1973 painting (*above*) is on show in the room next to Mark Rothko's *Seagram Murals*, exploring the conversation between the two artists.

Take five: details about a man with his head in the clouds

THE 'canvas' is tiny, the back of a postcard—literally. Close up, an embossed postal seal peeks from among the swirling clouds that fill the top half of the picture. The pocket-size picture (*right*) is a late work by Mexican artist José María Velasco on show at a National Gallery's exhibition devoted to him (until August 17; www.nationalgallery.org.uk):

1. After suffering an accident in 1901, the Mexican artist turned away from the monumentality of some of his earlier canvases to paint Nature on a smaller, more intimate scale, frequently on postcards

2. His approach changed, too. A natural historian as much as an artist, he had previously painted the landscapes of his native country—caught at the moment in which industrialisation began to leave its mark —with an almost forensic precision, using small brushes to render plants, rocks, lakes and skies. As he aged, he embraced looser, minimal brush strokes to capture clouds and light

3. In the late study at the National Gallery, billowing white puffs shroud a pale blue sky above a hint of mountain peaks. Yet, below them, there is only a band of ground colour—Velasco died before he could finish his picture

4. According to his descendant María Elena Altamirano Piolle, the artist worked on it on the morning of his death on August 26, 1912, although Dexter Dalwood, who co-curated the exhibition with Daniel Sobrino Ralston, believes it was begun at least a week earlier, based on the date on the back of the card

5. By 1912, Velasco's prestige had long dimmed: forced to retire from teaching, he had to contend with an artistic scene where everything had changed. Yet, he didn't give up and his luminous clouds remain as a poignant testimony of an artist who worked (almost) until the very end

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Huon Mallalieu

The eye of the connoisseur

The late Philip Astley-Jones collected 'the quirky and the humble, as well as the grand', and the sale of some of his paintings, small bronzes and furniture didn't disappoint

THE two Philips, Hewat-Jaboor and Astley-Jones, were business partners for two decades from 1979 when they left Sotheby's, running highly respected furniture restorer Hatfields. The business originated in 1834 and clients have included the Royal Collection, the Louvre in France, Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, the Frick in New York, US, the Wallace in London W1 and the collecting Gettys. Naturally, the Philips were themselves collectors and, as importantly, connoisseurs. Hewat-Jaboor died in 2022 (I mentioned his sale in COUNTRY LIFE, *February 21, 2024*) and Astley-Jones in 2021; a selection from the contents of his home on the Northamptonshire-Oxfordshire border was offered at Dreweatts on April 9.

In one of two catalogue essays, his life partner of four decades, the private jeweller Johnnie Lloyd Morgan, wrote that: 'If anyone can have half the fun that he had in collecting and half the fun that I had in watching a life-enhancing genius at work, then both of us will be enormously pleased.' He collected 'the quirky and the humble as well as the grand' and, literally on his deathbed, noticed an item in a catalogue that he had to have. The second essay was by Wolf Burchard, formerly a curator at the National Trust and Royal Collection and currently of the Metropolitan Museum, New York. In a similar vein, he recalled 'a pal and a mentor', whose 'generous character combined extraordinary energy and irreverence with kindness and a solid devotion to the enjoyment of life'.

Astley-Jones began his career with one of the truly remarkable dealers of the 20th century, Roger Warner of Burford, Oxfordshire, who not only supplied grand furniture and works of art to grand clients, but saw quality in lesser things that emerged from servants' quarters and outbuildings in country-house contents sales—the sort of things that had no interest to fellow dealers. Astley-Jones learned much from him and there were several things in his own sale that had a Warner provenance.

One of these was the best painting in the sale, which made the top price, £87,500 ***(Fig 1)***. It was a 34½in by 27in double portrait by John Thomas Seton (1738–1806), a Scot who went to India in 1776. His hopes of finding clients among his many compatriots there seem to have been justified and he stayed for most of the next decade. The sitters in this charming 1780 wedding portrait are Joseph and Ann Champion, who hold palm-leaf fans as they sit on a terrace with an elephant passing behind. They were happy enough with the result to commission a pair of half-lengths three years later. Champion was an East India Company pay-master and an authority on Persian poetry, and his wife was described in an obituary as 'the most hand-somest woman that ever left Europe for India'. Their pictured affection must have been genuine, because, after her death in 1791, he suffered a complete mental collapse. →

Fig 1: **John Thomas Seton's *Portrait of Mr and Mrs Joseph Champion*, which was painted in India in 1780. £87,500**

Fig 2: **A 1920s walnut Gothic open bookcase with an Art Nouveau-style gallery. £3,528**

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Art market

Among Astley-Jones's many enthusiasms was a relish for small bronzes and similar figures, including two lots with Irish connections. The first was a 10¾in-high bronze figure of George III in full 'Farmer George' pose with walking cane in hand that sold for £8,190, five times the estimate (***Fig 3***). It was by Lawrence Gahagan (about 1735–1820), the leading member of a confusing sept of sculpting brothers, sons and nephews who all moved to London. The family's most prominent work is the monument to Gen Picton in St Paul's Cathedral by Sebastian, a son.

Almost certainly also Irish in origin was a pair of small coloured wax bust portraits of bewigged gentlemen, which were offered in a Dutch ebonised and tortoiseshell casket (***Fig 4***). They were plausibly attributed to Samuel Percy (1750–1820), another Irishman who based himself in London, making regular business trips home to Dublin. Both busts and casket were damaged, but they still made £756. In the May 12, 1955, issue of Country Life, Graham Hughes wrote about Percy, who sometimes made elaborate tableaux, such as a tavern group of Johnson, Reynolds and friends, but more often he made single half-length figure portraits.

Fig 3 left: **George III by Lawrence Gahagan. £8,190.** *Fig 4 above:* **Percy's wax busts. £756**

There were several pieces of furniture that would have been neglected by bidders 10 years ago, but sold well above estimate, including a 1920s walnut open bookcase (***Fig 2***) that was basically Gothic with an almost Art Nouveau gallery, at £3,528 (estimated to £600), and a small George III mahogany Pembroke table at £1,386 (estimated to £400). Perhaps the buyer of the latter sniffed in the drawer, as Warner advised, to see if it smelled its age.

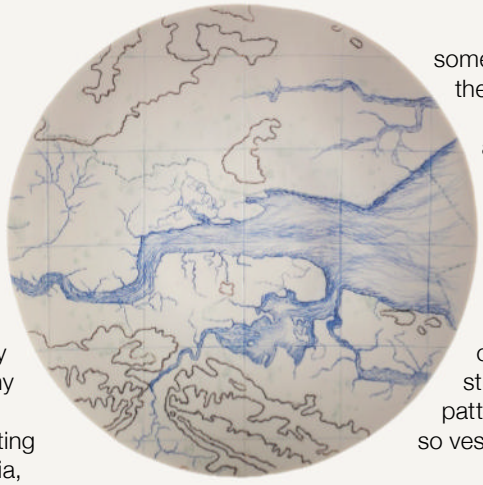
Next week **To the beat of his own drum**

Pick of the week

Philip Astley-Jones also had a good eye for contemporary studio pottery, including two pretty little jugs catalogued as 'in the style of' Walter Keeler that nonetheless sold for £403 (estimate to £80).

I think that he (and Roger Warner) would have approved of the Austrian potter Thomas Bohle (b. 1958), who is inspired by old forms and glazes and talks of his works with complete freedom from jargon: 'By being touched and used in daily life, they can explain themselves much better than any statement from me.'

Mr Bohle will be among the potters exhibiting at this year's Ceramic Art London (at Olympia, May 9–11). His wheel-thrown, double-walled stoneware bowl (*below*) with a cobalt-green glaze measures 9in across. The fair is organised by the Craft Potters Association and attracts more than 120 exhibitors from more than 30 countries. Election is by the membership and potters are understandably anxious to be accepted. After trying for 13 years, Loraine Rutt has made it with her porcelain pocket globes and other plates and vessels decorated with maps—earlier in her career, she worked as a cartographer. Her *Thames Water* (*above*) is decorated with platinum lustre, 'which is a carbon negative by-product diverted from landfill'. It should say something to water-company directors, had they eyes to see and ears to hear.



Jack Durling, who lives in the South Downs, also subtly touches on conservation issues. His 23½in-high *Penguin Colony: the Summit* (*below right*) is modelled using a combination of slab and coiling methods. He also features less threatened species found closer to home in the national park.

Another respected figure is Lara Scobie of Edinburgh, who slab-builds pots that are strongly decorated with colourful geometric patterns (*below left*). She uses Parian clay, so vessels can seem lit from within.

Sylvain Deleu; Shannon Tofts

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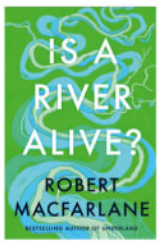


Is a River Alive?
Robert Macfarlane
(Hamish Hamilton, £25)

THE idea that a river is alive would probably get short shrift from most Western scientists. It doesn't meet two essential preconditions of a living organism: a river neither metabolises nor reproduces, nor does it possess DNA that is replicated and transmitted to offspring. Yet water is both central to the origins of all life and an ongoing prerequisite, constituting a high percentage of all organisms, from giant redwood trees to single-cell bacteria. These incontestable facts might not be the same as being alive, but the author's wish that we think differently about rivers is unassailable.

In Britain we know its importance only too well: 'The simple truth is,' pronounces water campaigner Feargal Sharkey, 'that every river in England is dying.' The appalling modern mistreatment of British waterways has partly inspired Mr Macfarlane to go in search of rivers worldwide. He describes journeys to Ecuador, India and Canada—places where rivers are equally at risk, but, ironically, where the book's central inquiry might receive more balanced reception. In 2007, the Ecuadorian people pioneered the granting of legal rights to landscape features such as rivers and forests, then enshrined the principle in their new constitution. When push comes to economic shove, however, even Ecuadorians have licensed Australian and Canadian mining companies to reduce the Rio Cedro and its flanking cloud forests to bare rock and mineral wealth.

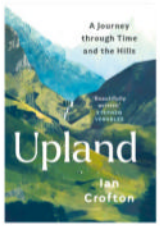
Hindu pilgrims perform rituals at Sangam. Other Indian waterways are less picturesque

> 'The appalling modern mistreatment of British waterways has inspired the author to go worldwide'

As much as the book is a celebration of rivers, it champions those magnificent individuals who devote their lives to the saving of them, such as Yuvan Aves, a young Indian activist who led a protest movement to halt the degradation of the Rivers Adyar and Cooum in Chennai, on the country's east coast, where they have been all but destroyed by both heavy industry and cynical city planners. Again, Mr Macfarlane highlights the contradictions in a culture that accords godlike status to the Ganges, yet pollutes the Adyar until its waters physically burn the bodies of impoverished fisherfolk.

What gives profound unity to this book is the author's relentless search for hopeful alternatives to our mistreatment of the biosphere, as well as his magnificent prose, which is as inventive, sparkling and fluent as its riverine theme. Judging from the prolonged discussion that unfolded in our household, I am certain it will inspire international debate upon its central question.

Mark Cocker



Upland:
A Journey Through Time and the Hills
Ian Crofton (Birlinn, £18.99)

HILLS are places, writes Ian Crofton, that 'unleash the spirit, sharpen our sense of beauty and potential'. It was not always thus: once, mountains were considered frightening, sterile landscapes where it was impossible to make a living. This is still challenging, but the idea of uplands as places of beauty and recreation took hold in the era of Ruskin and Wordsworth. Now, as the author observes, they are also grounds for tension—the number of wildfires this year has already reached 400, due perhaps to the de-stocking of grazing animals and the prevention of controlled burning. However, this book is written—beautifully—from the stance of a walker and historian, rather than rural commentator. It generally steers clear of countryside politics, save for odd swipes at landowners and grouse-shooting (which by no means takes place on every piece of British moorland).

When Mr Crofton moved from Edinburgh to north London some 30 years ago, his father warned him that he would find it a long way from any open hill country. As for Londoners in the Victorian and Edwardian ages, the South Downs, the Chilterns and the Ridgeway became a happy and relatively easy escape. The author brings these places alive, as well as wilder landscapes. Snowdon (Yr Wyddfa), he says, is incontestably the most elegant of Britain's highest peaks—Scafell Pike and Ben Nevis he describes as 'massive, ungainly lumps'—the approach from Capel Curig leading to 'a great sense of space and height, of dreams and possibilities'. Mr Crofton tries to envisage the Lake District before it was overtaken by tourism, remembers as a child on Skye laughing about Eilean 'Muck' (his mother was called Eileen) and lies down on the summit of Scald Law in the Pentlands, where 'it seemed as if all space and time reciprocated… as if I were cradled in a caring hand'. As a West Country resident, I am only sorry Mr Crofton didn't venture there, because if you haven't stood on Dunkery Beacon, you haven't lived. *KG*

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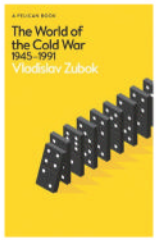


The World of the Cold War: 1945–1991
Vladislav Zubok
(Pelican, £25)

AT the conclusion of this formidable book—the author, born and educated in Moscow, then teaching in the US after the collapse of the Soviet Union and, since 2013, professor of international history at the London School of Economics—issues a salutary warning: 'The historian's task is to give coherent interpretation to chaotic developments; they should abstain from didactic attempts at wisdom and resist the temptation to overinterpret and impose grand schemes on messy human affairs. All the varied traditionalist, revisionist, or post-revisionist interpretations of the Cold War remain simply interpretations.'

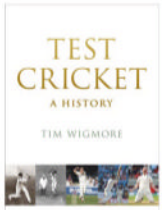
Fair enough, but should imposing 'grand schemes' be left to politicians who have little grasp of history, whether traditionalist or revisionist? 'Study history, study history. In history lies all the secrets of statecraft,' said Churchill. He might have quoted Ecclesiastes, too: 'There is no new thing under the sun.'

Studying the Cold War certainly makes for better understanding of our current 'messy human affairs', although, as Vladislav Zubok warns: 'There is no perfect knowledge or universal theory about how and why things may go wrong in international relations. New democratic elites, just like new autocratic rulers, are bound to walk into the same minefields, in semi-ignorance, driven by uncertainty, fear, arrogance, selfishness, and myopic readings of the past.'

Sign of the times: USSR propaganda portrays Uncle Sam as a stubborn warmonger

The Soviet collapse distorted the way that many look(ed) at the end of the Cold War, he argues: 'While the end of the Soviet system and state might have been determined by domestic factors, its rapid meltdown made the end… appear as an absolute Western victory. The United States and its Western allies suddenly became "the only pole in a new global order"… with pessimism and the exaggeration of Soviet power [giving] way to triumphalism and hubris'. He adds: 'The unintended outcomes of history set the stage for the illusions and mistakes of the following period, even beyond the Cold War.'

I read this book in draft in February, when the US was still the principal 'arsenal of democracy' (the phrase used by President Roosevelt a year before the US entered the Second World War), arming Ukraine to repel Russia. As I wrote this review, President Trump was disarming democracy. By the time it goes to print, I fear that Churchill's rebuke to Chamberlain after Munich may apply: 'You were given the choice between war and dishonour. You chose dishonour and you will have war.'
Allan Mallinson



Test Cricket: A History
Tim Wigmore (Quercus, £30)
The Final Test: The Uncertain Future of Cricket's First-Class Game
Huw Turbervill
(Bloomsbury, £20)

TIM WIGMORE is possibly the finest current cricket writer for providing thoughtful analysis, but he has set himself a challenging topic here, encompassing 148 years, a dozen countries and more than 2,500 matches. What is now accepted as counting as a Test match in the early years has been haphazardly and retrospectively adjudged, as have the nations that attained Test status. Mr Wigmore writes that: 'Based on their quality, both Argentina and the USA in the early 20th century had at least as strong a claim to getting Test status as South Africa a generation earlier.' However, Test status and politics have always been entwined; that cricket was run by the Imperial Cricket Council rather hampered Argentina and the US's chances. More recently, Asia's power has seen Bangladesh attain Test status when they did not merit it—they lost 26 of their first 27 Tests before rain allowed them a draw.

Test match special: Botham and co wait for play to start against New Zealand in 1986

Australia has been the most successful nation, with a wins-to-losses ratio of 1.75—no other Test side is even at 1.25. Mr Wigmore negotiates a huge field deftly and elegantly, his sporting narrative encompassing the socio-economic aspects.

T20 is resented by Huw Tubervill as a cuckoo in cricket's nest. England is one of few nations with a thriving Test scene, yet the prime weeks of last summer were given over to The Hundred, with the Ashes concertinaed in earlier before the schools had broken up. The subject matter of his *The Final Test* is ostentatiously the future of cricket, but he prefers to look back. He does not dissect the components of the challenge to Test and multi-day cricket nor proffer solutions. Instead, the editor of the *Cricketer* magazine often serves up a discursive trot through parts of his autobiography.
Roderick Easdale

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Bridge Andrew Robson

HERE are two deals that got away from a social rubber the other night over a bottle of Barolo. As declarer commented: 'If I'd drunk a little baroless, I may have made them both.'

Play the play in Four Spades on our first, West (having opened a Weak Two) leading Ace-King and a third Heart, East ruffing with the Queen of Spades.

Dealer West
Neither Vulnerable

	♠ K9643 ♥ Q105 ♦ AJ64 ♣ 8	
♠ J10 ♥ AK9643 ♦ 983 ♣ 94	N W+E S	♠ Q ♥ J7 ♦ Q105 ♣ KQ106532
	♠ A8752 ♥ 82 ♦ K72 ♣ AJ7	

South	West	North	East
	2♥(1)	Pass	3♣(2)
Pass	Pass	Dbl(3)	Pass
4♠	End		

1) Weak Two, showing a decent six-card suit and about 5–10 points.
2) Constructive (in principle—here barely), but non-forcing.
3) Take-out.

At the table, declarer over-ruffed the Queen of Spades with the Ace. He crossed to the King of Spades (East disappointingly discarding), crossed to the (Queen and) Ace of Clubs, ruffed a Club, crossed to the King of Diamonds and led a third Club.

If West had followed to the third Club, declarer would have read him for a two-six-two-three shape (in ranking order) and would have cashed the Ace of Diamonds and thrown him in with the second Spade to lead a Heart (perforce), giving a crucial ruff-and-discard. However, West turned up with only two Clubs, declarer needed the Diamond finesse to work—one down.

Declarer had blown it by over-ruffing East's Queen of Spades. Simply discard a Diamond and you can lay down your cards and claim the rest, drawing trumps. Well done if you spotted that.

There is no sure-fire line to make our second deal, a Six Heart slam, but you can drastically improve your odds by utilising all your assets. Plan the play on the Queen of Spades lead to your bare Ace.

Dealer South
Both Vulnerable

	♠ 72 ♥ A532 ♦ 10532 ♣ J108	
♠ QJ853 ♥ 8 ♦ KJ8 ♣ 9652	N W+E S	♠ K10964 ♥ 94 ♦ 974 ♣ 743
	♠ A ♥ KQJ1076 ♦ AQ6 ♣ AKQ	

South	West	North	East
2♣(1)	Pass	2♦(2)	Pass
2♥(3)	Pass	3♥(4)	Pass
4NT(5)	Pass	5♦(5)	Pass
5NT(6)	Pass	6♥(7)	End

1) Any hand with 23 or more points (or an upgrade for shape).
2) Negative or waiting.
3) Forcing to game with five or more Hearts.
4) Stronger than Four Hearts (just worth it).
5) Asking for Aces. Answer: one.
6) Confirming all the Aces and asking about Kings.
7) No Kings—playing the Specific Kings method, whereby you bid your (cheapest) King, rather than the number of Kings.

At the table, declarer drew trumps finishing in dummy, then tried a Diamond to the Queen. West won, got off play safely with a Spade and declarer had to hope the Knave of Diamonds was dropping under the Ace. One down. Declarer would have made a second Diamond trick about 60% of the time.

But let's up that to 75% using Elimination and Throw-in technique. Cash the King-Queen of Hearts (drawing trumps) and the three top Clubs. Now cross to the Ace of Hearts and ruff dummy's second Spade.

With both black suits eliminated, the scene is set. Exit with a low Diamond out of hand. If West has the Knave, you are home and dry, for he has to win with it; and now he is endplayed to lead a second Diamond round to your Ace-Queen, or give a ruff-and-discard, enabling you to ruff in dummy and shed the Queen of Diamonds from hand. If East beats the ten of Diamonds with the Knave, he'll have to return a Diamond (to avoid the ruff-and-discard), and you'll succeed unless West beats your Queen with the King.

Only if East has the Knave and West the King will your slam fail—and a one-in-four shot.

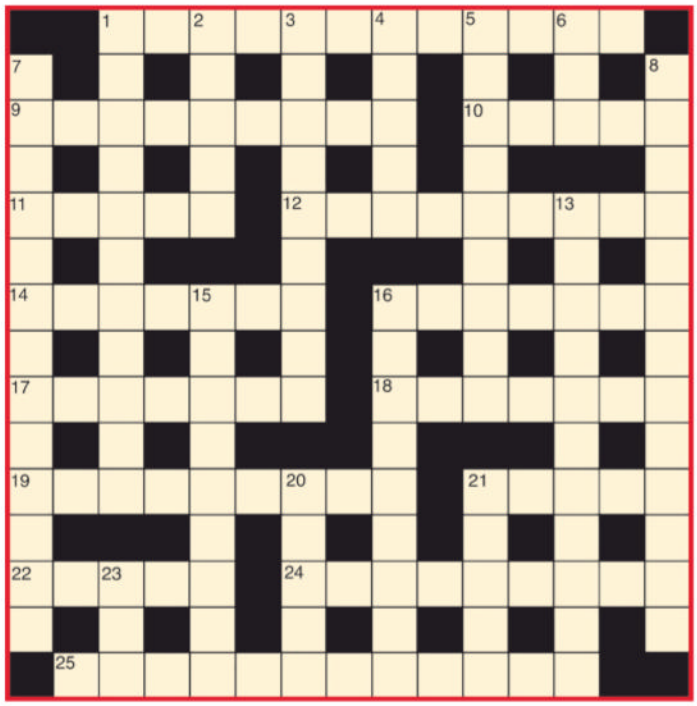
Crossword

A prize of £25 in book tokens will be awarded for the first correct solution opened. Solutions must reach Crossword No 4878, Country Life, 121–141 Westbourne Terrace, Paddington, London, W2 6JR, by **Tuesday, May 6**. UK entrants only

ACROSS
1 Great vessel for important contest (12)
9 Strangely inelegant Eurasian rose (9)
10 Fellow regularly seen in minister's house (5)
11 Attempt to muzzle unpredictable lurcher at first—really (5)
12 Some lout hit her toddling to that place (9)
14 Current movement involving bed and bite (3,4)
16 Are primates able to make savoury nibbles? (7)
17 Nutcases ride sow erratically (7)
18 Person pressing charges in RUC case perhaps (7)
19 One's found in one Asian republic, or another (9)
21 Lived comfortably, mostly, in outskirts of Detroit (5)
22 Simple peasant meeting upper-class Indian (5)
24 Opposed to former love's hors-d'oeuvre? (9)
25 Racehorse extremely elated with this record somehow (6,6)

DOWN
1 Pass over our window screen, confusing shades (6-5)
2 Aggravate a small number in New York (5)
3 Vain circle dipping into drink? Not so (9)
4 Daggers originally owned by biblical priest (5)
5 Like some music originally carried in my shop, oddly (9)
6 Fashionable northern drinking-place (3)
7 Dad initially with rowing crew entertaining English boxer? (13)
8 March display (13)
13 Took back soldiers in crazed state (11)
15 Bond, possibly, wearing false teeth (9)
16 Quirky person's letter (9)
20 Clever way to limit damage (5)
21 Small department initially having profundity (5)
23 Endless requirement for female born in France? (3)

4878 **CASINA**



SOLUTION TO 4877

ACROSS: 1, Esculents; 6, Ascot; 10, Roadster; 11, Flower; 12, Mendelianism; 14, Gong; 15, Eversion; 18, Bludging; 19, Like; 21, New Caledonia; 24, Visits; 25, Assailed; 26, Agree; 27, Personate. DOWN: 2, Shot; 3, Undamaged; 4, Extant; 5, Three-legged race; 7, Shown; 8, Overstocks; 9, Officer; 13, Mouldering; 16, Salvation; 17, Hit list; 20, Onuses; 22, Chide; 23, Rent.

The winner of 4876 is M. O. England, Shrivenham, Oxfordshire

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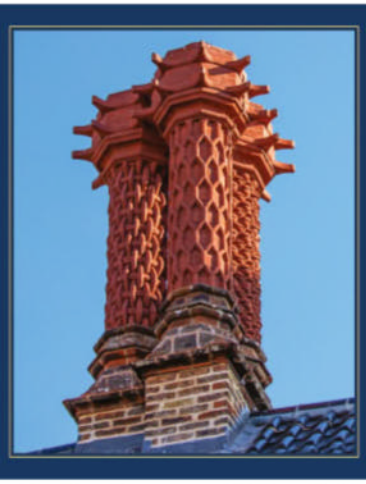

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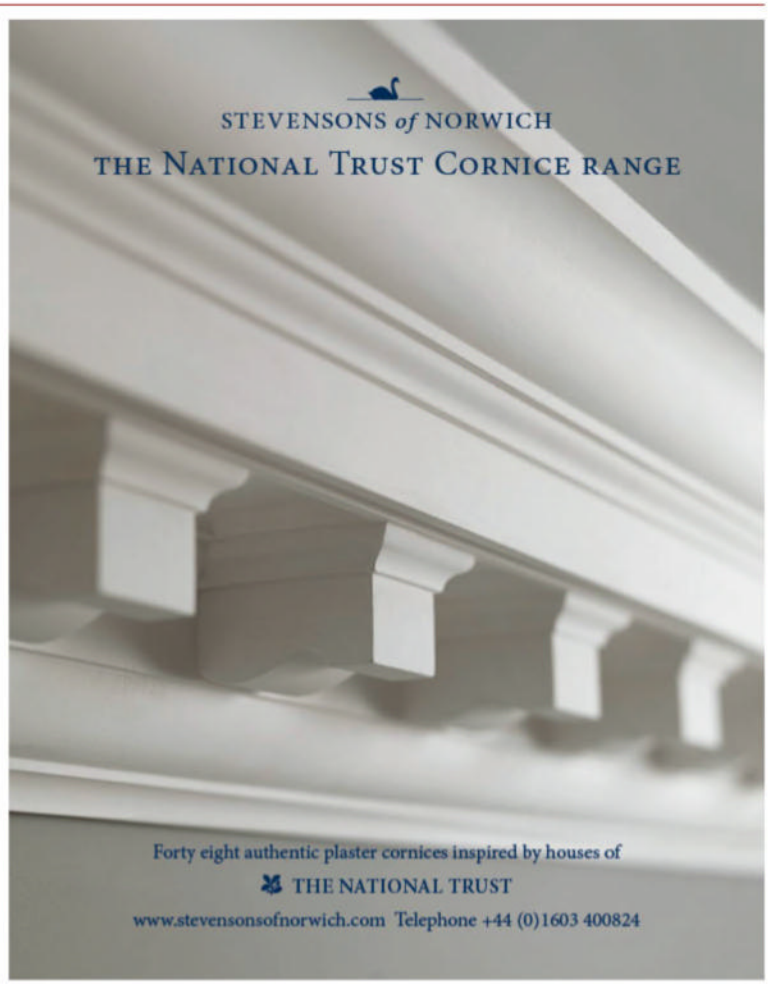
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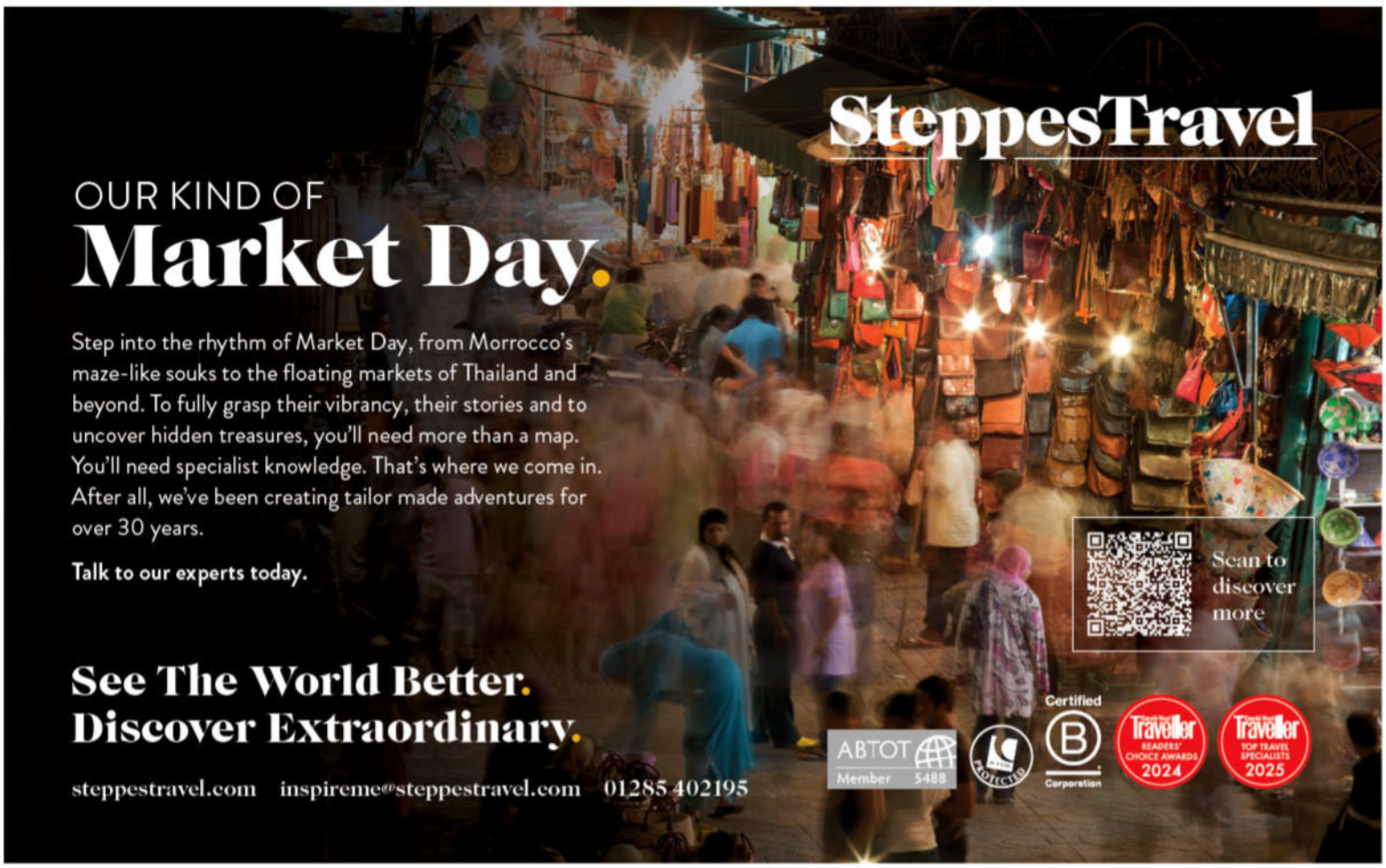
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Joe Gibbs

See yew, Jimmy

THERE is a tale that, on the afternoon of the battle of Culloden, a messenger brought the women of Clan Fraser in Stratherrick news of Bonnie Prince Charlie's defeat. Knowing their vanquished menfolk would be famished and weary, the women left them food and drink under a secret yew tree by Loch Ness. Their pursuit was hot, but the men tarried long enough for refreshment. This being the Highlands, the tale holds that a good measure of the *uisge beatha* has been left there ever since.

It being near to that date, my friend Jonny and I determined to walk to the Fraser Yew. Across a loch from Knockie Lodge on the south-east side of the Great Glen, the route begins with deceptive ease on a track that soon peters out into vagueness, as so many Highland tracks do. Eventually, a deer fence must be climbed, a terrier fed through the Rylock mesh and then the descent becomes steep and uncertain over boulders and tussocks of moss and heather.

The yew is well hidden, on its own grassy shelf, with a small burn running past it. In the days when all 23 miles of the south-east side of Loch Ness were Fraser, part of the 500 square miles of their lands, this tree was their gathering place. Before battle or a neighbourly cattle raid, this is where the boys got into a bonding huddle in the manner of Celtic football players.

It is an extraordinary tree. The centre has died, but the branches have layered outward and upward, giving it a 100ft circumference. Branches of yew and of the Frasers are intertwined down the centuries. Sir Simon 'The Patriot' Fraser was the owner of the Peebles castle Neidpath, which is the only place where a species of fastigated yew, *Taxus baccata* 'Neidpathensis', is found.

> 'We found the whisky still left by an unseen hand for weary fugitives in the hollow trunk'

Captured by King Edward's forces, the Patriot died a grisly traitor's death in 1306 during the Scottish Wars of Independence. His head joined William Wallace's on London Bridge. His male cousins high-tailed it to the Highlands and became the Lovat Frasers.

If history were *Outlander*, the Fraser Yew would have been brought by them from Neidpath. Disappointingly, however, it appears to be a bog-standard yew and is anyway claimed to be more than 1,000 years old. More likely, a bird ate a berry off a long-gone sacred tree at the nearby church of St Cuimen the Fair, now Fort Augustus, and sowed the seed of a legend. To add to the general hue about yew, the foliage is the badge of Clan Fraser, who were a Norman family, descendants of Norsemen to whom the tree was sacred.

The origins of the Fraser badge may be lost, but we found the whisky still left by an unseen hand for weary fugitives in the hollow trunk. I hid a bottle of the amber in the vicinity for Lennox, my second triplet grandson, as I have done elsewhere for his marginally elder brother; cryptic verses may lead them to their enjoyment when they come of age.

We enlivened the uphill trudge back by recalling the Siege of Knockie in 1967, when an ex-commando sergeant Richard Cawthorne was jailed for the attempted murder of his lover Rosemary, Lady Mactaggart at Knockie Lodge. In the most dramatic event in Stratherrick since Culloden, a slighted Cawthorne's rifle fire kept Lady M pinned down under the billiard table. The local bobby in Fort Augustus allegedly claimed a bad line when he got the call for help, not wanting to get caught in the crossfire of a domestic at the big hoose.

Next week **Jason Goodwin**

TOTTERING-BY-GENTLY By Annie Tempest

Visit Tottering-By-Gently on our website: **www.countrylife.co.uk/tottering**

I've put GPS tracking on all the Easter eggs I've hidden in the garden this year...
Look!.. Oh! That's odd! The big one from Fortnums appears to be on the move...
TWIGLET!!!
Annie Tempest © 2025

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